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A View from the City: Creation, Recreation, y la Nueva Creación¹

Carmen Nanko-Fernández

Catholic Theological Union

In the beginning, since the Christian god was running late, Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc created the heaven and the earth (so called because its most abundant component was water . . . and the first things the gods did to improve the appearance of the first city was creating a Centre, since they were aware of its magnetic pull . . . Soon Tenochtitlan was inhabited and organized in its very avant-garde fashion, and then came the creation of the Providence to promote migrations to the big city.²

Carlos Monsiváis

The City as Nuevo Cotidiano

The twenty-first century is marked by a shift to urbanization. The United Nations estimates that by 2030, over 60% of the global population will reside in urban areas, with one in every three people living in cities of at least half a million inhabitants.³ As of 2008, over half of

¹ This article is a revision of the paper “Real-izing Escatología: Creation, Recreation, y la Nueva Creación,” prepared for *A Communion of Creation: Latinxs, Environmental Racism, and the Struggle for Ecological Justice*, Colloquium of the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians (ACHTUS), June 2018, Indianapolis, Indiana.

² Carlos Monsiváis, “Assembly of Cities,” in José Miguel G. Cortés [author, editor, and curator], *Dissident Cartographies*, curator, (Barcelona: Sociedad Estatal para la Acción Cultural Exterior [SEACEX], 2008), n.p.

the world's population resides in cities⁴ and 77% of megacities, with populations of ten million or more, are currently located in less developed regions and in the global south.⁵ Almost twenty-three per cent are part of mundo latino construed broadly: two Brazilian cities (São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro); Lima, Peru; Buenos Aires, Argentina; Mexico City, Mexico; and the two U.S. urban agglomerations with the largest Latin@ populations (Los Angeles, CA, and New York, NY-Newark, NJ). "Latin America and the Caribbean is the region with the largest proportion of the population concentrated in megacities," says the U.N. report. San Juan, Puerto Rico (pre-María) ranks fourth in the world of cities whose urban population is concentrated in a single municipality (71.5 %).⁶

In 2007, in anticipation of the global demographic change to a majority urban population, the UN noted in its *State of the World Population* report that this move would not be without environmental consequences. "The conventional wisdom has been that the expansion of urban space is detrimental in itself. Since many cities are situated at the heart of rich agricultural areas or other lands rich in biodiversity, the extension of the urban perimeter evidently cuts further into available productive land and encroaches upon important ecosystems."⁷ The report concluded,

³ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), Population Division, *The World's Cities in 2016*, Data Booklet (ST/ESA/SER.A/392) 2016, 2, http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/urbanization/the_worlds_cities_in_2016_data_booklet.pdf.

⁴ United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), *State of World Population: Unleashing the Potential of Urban Growth*, <http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2007/english/introduction.html>.

⁵ UN DESA, *The World's Cities in 2016*, 4.

⁶ UN DESA, 5, 7.

⁷ UNFPA, *State of World Population*, Chapter 4, "Urban Growth and Sustainable Use of Space," http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2007/english/chapter_4/index.html.

however, that “there is increasing realization that urban settlements are actually necessary for sustainability. The size of the land area appropriated for urban use is less important than the way cities expand: Global urban expansion takes up much less land than activities that produce resources for consumption.”⁸ A decade later, reports reiterate the paradox that environmental sustainability may well depend on urbanization. The 2016 UN *World Cities Report* notes: “Urban development enables human communities to expand the amount of space available to them even as the surface of planet Earth appears to be more finite than ever.”⁹ Such cautious optimism is not naïve to the interventions needed for cities to be transformative sites that can be resilient, “sustainable, inclusive and ensure a high quality of life for all.”¹⁰

A View Through an Hurban@ Lens

As shifting Latin@ populations continue to reshape and fuel the growth of any number of U.S. cities and their surrounding metropolitan areas,¹¹ it is appropriate and timely to employ critically an urban optic, especially in viewing matters of creation and recreation. My distinctive perspective from the city is grounded in a hybridity that is characteristic of Latin@ experiences

⁸ UNFPA, *State of World Population*, Chapter 4.

⁹ United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), *World Cities Report 2016, Urbanization and Development: Emerging Futures, Key Findings* (Nairobi, Kenya: UN-Habitat, 2016), 19, http://wcr.unhabitat.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/WCR-2016_-Abridged-version-1.pdf.

¹⁰ UN-Habitat, *World Cities Report 2016, Key Findings*, 10.

¹¹ Pew Research Center, “Hispanic Population and Origin in Select U.S. Metropolitan Areas, 2014,” *Hispanic Trends*, September 6, 2016, <http://www.pewhispanic.org/interactives/hispanic-population-in-select-u-s-metropolitan-areas/>. For example, here is the 2018 Latin@ demographic data for cities and towns of Indiana, the site of our ACHTUS Colloquium: Chris Kolmar, “These Are the 10 Indiana Cities with the Largest Hispanic Population for 2018,” *HomeSnacks*, January 6, 2018, <https://www.homesnacks.net/most-hispanic-cities-in-indiana-1210760/>.

of la vida cotidiana in the U.S. These are experiences marked by fluidity in languages, traditions, migrations, cultures, and identities, and in the ethnic and racial constitution of individuals and families. To underscore these dynamic and fluid interactions, I employ what I call a distinctly hurban@ (hispan@ and urban) hermeneutic: in other words, the city engaged from a particular socially located Latin@ perspective is both interpretive stance and *locus theologicus*.¹² At the same time, the city as biodiverse ecosystem, as site of resistance, as source of policies and practices that manage, control, sustain, order, and exploit the environment are critically examined with particular attention to the scholarship of Latin@s and scholars from communities minoritized in the academy. I intentionally privilege these perspectives in this investigation, in part because considerations of environmental racism and ecological justice are too often areas where these perspectives are underrepresented, while the communities most impacted are overrepresented.

¹² I borrow the term Hurbano, a short-lived Spanglish neologism for a programming format of contemporary music that is both Hispanic and urban. See “Genre Watch: Reggaeton,” *Electronic Musician*, January 5, 2007, <https://www.emusician.com/gear/genre-watch-reggaeton>. I use @, an arroba with an acute accent, in place of a gendered ending as a means of destabilizing gender polarities, signifying the fluidity of language, culture, and identity, and to emphasize the role of location and situatedness in theology done latinamente. It is precisely the locating of urban Latin@ perspectives that drives this proposal for an hurban@ theological lens. Initially I proposed and explored this perspective in “Creation: A Cosmo-politan Perspective,” in *In Our Own Voices: Latino/a Renditions of Theology*, ed. Benjamín Valentín (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 41-63. Some of the biblical scholarship of Jean-Pierre Ruiz and David Sánchez reflects what I consider an hurban@ perspective. See Ruiz, “‘They Could Not Speak the Language of Judah’: Rereading Nehemiah 13 between Brooklyn and Jerusalem,” in *They Were All Together in one Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, Randall C. Bailey, Tat-siong Benny Liew and Fernando Segovia, eds. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009) 79-96; Sánchez, *From Patmos to the Barrio: Subverting Imperial Myths* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).

Overlooked in the theological interpretations of cosmological texts is the complex role of the metropolis: in the construction of narratives about origins and ends; in shaping the cosmovisions of authors and interpreters; as ritual or ceremonial cosmic topography; as eschatological metaphor. The implicit message sent by this theological stance is that creation themes are antithetical to the city, that nature and culture inhabit separate spheres, that the rural is preferred over the urban as a site of creaturely communion, that the transcendent is primarily accessible in isolation in the pristine wilderness, that the eschatological city is realizable only for elites.

Creation and eschatology are about narrating and navigating relationships, place, space, and time. Fueled in part by millennial visions of establishing the New Jerusalem in their conquest of América, Catherine Zerner writes, “Spaniards had to confront and contend with autochthonous methods of urban design—Aztec and Inka urban centers and conceptions of space—and visual mapping that they recognized as equal, and in some respects superior, to their own.”¹³ Urbanization strategically enhanced processes of colonization and evangelization. Cities centralized the power of empires, but they were also loci of resistance in revolutionary movements at home and in diaspora. Hispan@ cities were and continue to be marked as sacred spaces through processions, pilgrimages, and fiestas for countless holy patrons y Marías that claim las calles y las plazas. The Spaniards were not the first to construct cities en América, as los conquistadores españoles learned, and, thanks to advances in technology, rain forests, from the Amazon through tropical wilderness in Central America, are revealing hidden histories of

¹³ Catherine Zerner, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 60, no. 2 (2001): 221, doi:10.2307/991711.

human settlements, including ancient cities in areas formerly regarded as uninhabited and/or uninhabitable.¹⁴

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, scholars have noted, the influence of Protestant postmillennial discourse on USA urban planners and social city reformers “helped embed eschatology in the geography of the twentieth-century city.”¹⁵ In the city and from these anticipated New Jerusalems arose impulses to (re-)create and recreate, resulting in the development of urban green spaces like Central Park in New York, the preservation of the wilderness through the institution of National Parks, and “the emergence of the conservation movement and other manifestations of evangelical concern for nature, such as the Audubon Society.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Among the most recent revelations, see Katarina Zimmer, “Soil and Satellites Are Telling a New Story About Ancient Civilizations in the Amazon,” *Atlas Obscura*, March 20, 2018, <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/amazon-terra-preta-to-find-ancient-civilizations>; Jonas Gregório de Souza, Denise Pahl Schaan, Mark Robinson, Antonia Damasceno Barbosa, Luiz E. O. C. Aragão, Ben Hur Marimon Jr., Beatriz Schwantes Marimon, Izaias Brasil da Silva, Salman Saeed Khan, Francisco Ruji Nakahara, and José Iriarte, “Pre-Columbian Earth-builders Settled Along the Entire Southern Rim of the Amazon,” *Nature Communications* 27 (March 2018), <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-018-03510-7>; Christopher T. Fisher, Juan Carlos Fernández-Díaz, Anna S. Cohen, Oscar Neil Cruz, Alicia M. Gonzáles, Stephen J. Leisz, Florencia Pezzutti, Ramesh Shrestha, and William Carter, “Identifying Ancient Settlement Patterns through LiDAR in the Mosquitia Region of Honduras,” *PLOS One* (August 25, 2016), <http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0159890>.

¹⁵ Phillip G. Mackintosh and Clyde R. Forsberg, Jr., “‘Co-Agent of the Millennium’: City Planning and Christian Eschatology in the North American City, 1890–1920,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 103:3 (February 2012), 742, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00045608.2011.652888>.

¹⁶ Mackintosh and Forsberg, “Co-Agent of the Millennium,” 7.

In the words of Pope Francis, referencing Revelation 21:2-4, “It is curious that God’s revelation tells us that the fullness of humanity and of history is realized in a city.”¹⁷

RE-IMAGINING SPACE: (RE-) CREATION FOR RECREATION

In Book XV of *The Etymologies*, Isidoro de Sevilla (560-636 CE) turns his attention to cities, where he distinguishes between the physical structures and the inhabitants.

A city [*civitas*] is a multitude of people united by a bond of community, named for its ‘citizens’ [*civis*], that is, from the residents of the city [*urbs*] [because it has jurisdiction over and contains the lives (*contineat vitas*) of many]. Now *urbs* (also “city”) is the name for the actual buildings, while *civitas* is not the stones, but the inhabitants.¹⁸

Isidoro further clarifies:

A city properly so called is one that has been founded not by newcomers but by those native to its soil. Therefore communities [*urbs*] founded by their own citizens [*civis*] are named cities [*civitas*], not colonies. On the other hand, a colony [*colonia*] is what is filled by new inhabitants [*cultor*] when there are no indigenous people. Hence also a ‘colony’ is so called from the tilling [*cultus*, past participle of *colere*] of a field.¹⁹

¹⁷ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), 71, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

¹⁸ *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, ed. Stephen A. Barney, et al. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), XV.ii.1, 305 (in Latin), <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/isidore/15.shtml>.

¹⁹ *Etymologies of Isidore*, XV.ii.8-9, 306.

The Spanish privileging of the people over the stones became a paradigm of early modern Spanish thought and this pueblo-centric disposition intersected with that of indigenous peoples in América as well as criollos y criollas.²⁰ The obligation to city was considered by some to be a bond stronger than to king or family.²¹ Who belonged to the city and in what capacity is another issue when one considers that by the parameters of Isidoro's definitions, en América los peninsulares were newcomers, not natives to the soil.

The role of the city as a human-created environment, as an ecosystem, as source of practices and policies that determine the allocation, identity, and usage of space is underexplored in U.S. environmentalism. In U.S. cities, Dorceta Taylor writes, "human labor was exploited to transform forests into commodities, pavement, and buildings ... intellectuals theorized about the relationship between health and open space, and reformers implemented policies and programs to improve quality of life for urban dwellers."²² In these contexts, cities emerged as acts of human creation entailing appropriation and reordering of spaces in ways detrimental and destructive to existing ecosystems. Paradoxically, the move to insert green places into the city was an act of (re-)creation for the purposes of recreation, a restoration of the so-called natural world in order to relieve the populace from the stress of city living. The origins of Central Park

²⁰ Richard L. Kagan and Fernando Marías, *Urban Images of the Hispanic World, 1493-1793* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 9-11, 24.

²¹ Kagan and Marías, *Urban Images*, 24. Bartolomé de las Casas saw allegiance of a city to the king to be weaker than that of citizen to city. Jurist Juan de la Costa saw obligation to city as greater than even obligation to familia.

²² Dorceta E. Taylor, *The Environment and People in American Cities, 1600s-1900s: Disorder, Inequality and Social Change* (Durham, NC: University Press, 2009), 2.

in New York City serve as a salient example because of the subsequent influence of the park's designers on the urban parks movement across the country. From the urban parks movement, which focused on recreation within the city, emerged preservation and/or conservation outside of the city and the establishment of the National Parks.²³ Both movements participated in processes of (re-)creation that were intended for purposes of recreation—in other words, for activities that enhanced enjoyment and quality of life, especially for elite urban dwellers—and benefited the health and well-being of all inhabitants. At the same time, in order to achieve these ends, among others, “wilderness” was defined as pristine and natural and therefore uninhabited. (Re-)creating these spaces for recreation inevitably entailed the removal of peoples from their land, with a disproportionate impact on those made most vulnerable

A Non-Innocent City Park

When my Mami was a kid, her playground was Central Park in New York City because “it was the only place my Mommy could afford to take us.”²⁴ Little did she know that the movement that led to the construction of one of her favorite places seven decades before her

²³ Please note that conservation and preservation, while often used interchangeably, are two different approaches to environment. Conservation entails modified and prudent use of resources; preservation designates certain spaces as protected in their natural condition for posterity.

²⁴ Conversation with my Mom, Carmen Nanko, May 13, 2018. Mom remembered the sheep on the Sheep Meadow which were relocated in 1934. In a curious note, the grazing sheep were added in 1864 in an unsuccessful attempt to prevent militia from drilling on the open area originally known as the Parade Ground. In 1865 a state law was passed forbidding military parades in Central Park. This desire to keep militias out had to do with the “incompatibility” of the class of people attached to this activity—“rowdy working-class culture”—with the elites frequenting the park. Fire company picnics and Irish Catholic church picnics were also denied permits on similar grounds. See Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 252-253.

birth was not intended, by some, for Spanish-speaking immigrants like her familia. Inspired by the grand parks in Europe, the city's wealthy patrons sought spaces where they could safely promenade without sharing streets crowded with laborers and immigrants because "time was when a modest woman could walk from one end to the other of our main thoroughfare without being stared out of countenance by troops of whiskered and mustachioed chatterers, and without danger of being crushed to death ... or thrust, under the wheels of an omnibus."²⁵ Public recreational space for walking and carriage rides, within reasonable distance from the urban elite's lower Manhattan homes, motivated their support of the urban park movement in the mid-to late 19th century. The affluent, and social reformers as well, saw urban green spaces as a way to improve health, alleviate the effects of poor sanitation and pollution, and expose the working class, immigrants, and poor to cultural refinement in the spirit of egalitarian democracy. While Central Park's intended purpose was "to provide the best practicable means of healthful recreation, for the inhabitants of the city, of all classes,"²⁶ the park was not, initially, easily accessible without the financial means necessary to afford transportation, and its presence did more to enhance surrounding property values than to provide morally acceptable diversions for the vast majority of the poorer and more vulnerable urban residents.

Central Park was designed as a natural landscape in 1858 by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, whose proposal defeated more than thirty competitors.²⁷ Olmsted conceived of the

²⁵ "The Decline of Broadway: The New Park," *The Evening Post*, July 10, 1851, 2.

²⁶ Most likely this section of the report was authored by Olmsted as Architect-in-Chief and Superintendent of Central Park, *Third Annual Report of The Board of Commissioners of the Central Park*, January 1860 (New York: Wm. C. Bryant & Co., 1860), 36.

²⁷ Significant primary and secondary resources on Central Park include Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*; Dorceta E. Taylor, *The Environment and People*, 221-363;

park, in design and function, as a pastoral respite achieved by conveying an “aspect of spaciousness and tranquility, with variety and intricacy of arrangement, thereby affording the most agreeable contrast to the confinement, bustle, and monotonous street-division of the city.”²⁸ Space was engineered in a manner that (re-)created a “natural” environment able to accommodate large numbers of people approaching by foot, horse, and moving vehicles, yet was art and not “mere imitation of nature.”²⁹ In order to (re-)create nature, “purpose . . . imposed by conditions of soil and exposure, by rocks and springs” required, among other destructive and reconstructive interventions, “blasting, draining, grading, screening, [and] manuring.”³⁰

and Historical Reports, Press Releases, and Minutes, Official Website of the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation, digital archive, <https://www.nycgovparks.org/news/reports/archive>. Olmsted and Vaux’s proposal was number 33; there were thirty-five entrants but two were discounted. Olmsted and Vaux submitted their proposal on March 30, 1858, the winning proposal was announced in April, and Olmsted sent a letter acknowledging his new role as architect of the park on May 20, 1858. The letter was entered in its totality in the minutes of a special meeting. Frederick Law Olmsted,” To the Board of Commissioners of the Central Park” (May 20, 1858) in “Minutes,” Special Meeting of the Board of Commissioners of the Central Park” (May 27, 1858), 51-52, <https://www.nycgovparks.org/pagefiles/48/Board%20of%20Commissioners%20of%20the%20Central%20Park%20-%20Minutes%20-%20April%2030%201859.pdf>. It is important to note that Vaux’s role as equal partner has been overlooked over time and lost to more popular knowledge about Central Park. This depreciation of his collaborative role begins with Olmsted.

²⁸ *Third Annual Report of The Board of Commissioners of the Central Park*, 36.

²⁹ Olmsted, Vaux & Co., *Preliminary Report to the Commissioners for Laying Out a Park in Brooklyn, New York: Being a Consideration of Circumstances of Site and Other Conditions Affecting the Design of Public Pleasure Grounds* (Brooklyn, NY: Van Andens Print, 1866), <https://archive.org/details/preliminaryrepor1866olms>, 8-11.

³⁰ Olmsted, Vaux & Co., *Preliminary Report*, 12.

For Olmsted and Vaux, an urban landscaped park reflected “a pleasure, common, constant and universal to all town parks,” that provides an experience of relief for park visitors “escaping from the cramped, confined and controlling circumstances of the streets of the town; in other words, *a sense of enlarged freedom* is to all, at all times, the most certain and the most valuable gratification afforded by a park.”³¹ The aesthetic elements were necessary to inspire transcendence, “tranquilizing and grateful, as expressed by the Hebrew poet: ‘He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside the still waters.’”³²

De-People and Deport

In order for the city to construct the park, land needed to be vacated and all memory of the existence of its former inhabitants erased. The area was reimagined and remembered as only a wilderness--as barren and dreary a wilderness as one might ever wish to enter. Despite the marvels of science, art, and enterprise now to be seen there at every step, the whole region, less than a single decade ago, was a jungle, in which desolate ridges of barren rock alternated with dark morass and stagnant fen, and from which even such scant charms as nature had originally bestowed upon it had been stripped by the lawless vagabonds who had hidden themselves within its wild recesses.³³

³¹ Olmsted, Vaux & Co., *Preliminary Report*, 4,

³² Olmsted, Vaux & Co., *Preliminary Report*, 13.

³³ T. Addison Richards, *Guide to the Central Park* (New York: James Miller, 1866) (digitized), 9. Provides a detailed description of the park, its features, costs, counts of visitors, and ordinances.

Those who were allegedly “dwelling in the squalid huts of this God-forsaken terra incognita”³⁴ included the tax-paying residents of the thriving middle class African American community of Seneca Village, who were displaced by eminent domain.³⁵ Located three miles north of the city proper, the village was established in the 1820s.³⁶ By the time the land to be used for Central Park was identified, Seneca’s population of 264 people was two-thirds African American and one-third primarily immigrant Irish and some German. Documentary evidence indicates a fairly stable Black community; over half were landowners, though prevalent racism, xenophobia, and fears of mixing races resulted in depictions of inhabitants as poor, wretched, debased, and criminal.³⁷ The Seneca community contained a school and three Christian churches, two African American Methodist and one mixed race Episcopal congregation.

An estimated 1600 people lived in the future park environs, most of them in a subsistence relationship with the area’s natural resources and deriving economic value as well from the city’s

³⁴ Richards, *Guide to the Central Park*, 9-10.

³⁵ In 2001, a plaque was finally placed in Central Park acknowledging the existence of Seneca Village.

³⁶ For research on Seneca Village, see Diana diZerega Wall, Nan A. Rothschild, and Cynthia Copeland, “Seneca Village and Little Africa, Two African American Cities in Antebellum New York City,” *Historical Archaeology* 42, no.1 (2008): 97-107, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25617485>; Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 65-73 ; Matthew Wright, “How America’s First Black Middle Class Village Was destroyed to Make Way for Central Park,” *The Weekly Challenger*, March 16, 2017, <http://theweeklychallenger.com/how-americas-first-black-middle-class-village-was-destroyed-to-make-way-for-central-park/>; and Seneca Village Project, http://www.mcah.columbia.edu/seneca_village/index.html.

³⁷ Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 66-68.

refuse and from their own livestock, crops, and gardens.³⁸ The majority, like their neighbors in Seneca, were employed as laborers and domestic help or provided other services.³⁹ Among the displaced were Irish immigrants from local Catholic parishes who lived as they had in Ireland, tending small farms, raising crops, selling milk, and working as day laborers.⁴⁰ In 1857, Commissioners of the Central Park removed or demolished three hundred dwellings and a number of factories and other businesses⁴¹ that many considered “nuisances in the eye of the law, and forbidden to be carried on so near the city.”⁴² Justification for the appropriation of the land was supported by portrayals that focused on its perceived disvalue as “straggling suburbs . . . filthy, squalid and disgusting.”⁴³ In turn, its residents were similarly disparaged and deprecated as squatters, not neighbors.

³⁸ Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 70.

³⁹ Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 64-65; Taylor, *The Environment and People*, 274.

⁴⁰ Taylor, *The Environment and People*, 276. It is worth noting that the Vicar General of the Catholic Diocese of New York from 1837 until his death in 1853, the Cuban exile priest Félix Varela y Morales, was the champion of the poor and of immigrants. See “Father Felix Varela, Vicar General of New York 1837-1853,” *The American Catholic Quarterly Review* 6, no. 31 (July 1883): 463-476.

⁴¹ *Third Annual Report of The Board of Commissioners of the Central Park*, 35.

⁴² *Third Annual Report*, 34. These businesses usually were distinguished by emitting noxious odors, smoke, and/or noise, or perceived as sanitation issues, e.g. bone-boiling works and piggeries. New York City, among other U.S. cities, was noted for the domestic pigs and hogs that roamed its streets until after the 1849 cholera epidemic, when they were driven north. See Enrique Alonso and Ana Recarte, “Pigs in New York City: A Study on 19th Century Urban ‘Sanitation,’” Friends of Thoreau, Environmental Program Research Institute of North American Studies, University of Alcalá, Spain, <https://www.institutofranklin.net/sites/default/files/fckeditor/CS%20Pigs%20in%20New%20York.pdf>.

(Re-)Creation in Whose Image

In order to establish places in “tune with nature” for the purposes of recreation—elite humans turned to (re-)creating--in a twisted way—first by de-peopling spaces, thus missing the point of the diversity of creatureliness. Urban parks manipulated ecosystems (that included human habitation) and (re-)created landscaped “nature” in the orchestrated void. Park designs retained some topical features and removed whatever challenged the guiding pastoral aesthetic.⁴⁴ They added alien features, translocated flora, established boundaries to separate the park from the city that was its home, and instituted rules to control the behaviors of humans who were now visitors but not inhabitants. In this way the city (re-)created and managed a new creation (the green space) within a creation (the city) that had not figured out how live in an ecologically sustainable way.

Repopulation of the reconfigured space was intended for the wealthy and the middle class, who, through contact with their refinement, would acculturate the working classes and immigrants who shared the park. The notion that parks were effective tools for social control was evident as well in one of the 35 design proposals submitted in the competition.

If . . . disorderly people find at the outset that the Park is no place for them, that they are marked, followed, watched, and annoyed in every way by the authorities,

⁴³ *Third Annual Report*, 34.

⁴⁴ There exist a number of primary source documents written by Olmsted articulating his vision as well as topographical evidence in the parks he designed. It was noted in a 1977 essay that Olmsted’s work and vision has received little scholarly critique. See Robert Lewis, “Frontier and Civilization in the Thought of Frederick Law Olmsted,” *American Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (Autumn 1977): 385-387, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2712366.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A425d90b588dafaf408b4a67dc434761f>.

so long as the disorderly element manifests itself, they will be overawed by the moral influence and example of the well-conducted, and will soon find that the Central Park is a greater boon to them than to their more fortunate fellow-citizens.

I can conceive nothing better calculated to humanize the brutal and refine the coarse, than the page of the book of nature, which the calm lawns, woods, and lakes of Central Park will present to them . . . I wish to keep no class out of the Park, but I desire all to behave themselves when in it; and this, I am sure, strict police supervision, and nothing else, will effect.⁴⁵

Through carefully constructed environments, Olmsted and others participated in traditioning particular values that continue to directly or indirectly influence practices and policies that impose “civilizing” influences on la tierra and its people. The role of Central Park is significant because it was the first of its kind in the USA which also eschewed the gardenesque styles popular in Europe and yet reflected respect for European culture in order to “defeat the new barbarism. The themes of social progress and social control in Olmsted’s thought were not simply paradoxical but central to his theory of civilization.”⁴⁶ The vision of Europe was narrow since the barbarism they sought to defeat in the city was primarily European immigrant. The

⁴⁵ “Report, Accompanying Design, For Laying Out ‘Central Park,’ Marked ‘Arcadia,’” submitted March 18, 1858 (New York: J. W. Bell), 10, http://home2.nyc.gov/html/records/pdf/govpub/4072architect_report_manhattan_central_park_1858.pdf. There is no name on the proposal but in handwriting on the cover sheet it is identified as No. 23.

⁴⁶ Robert Lewis, “Frontier and Civilization in the Thought of Frederick Law Olmsted,” *American Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (Autumn, 1977): 403, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2712366.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A425d90b588dafaf408b4a67dc434761f>.

identity of the U.S. was at stake. A nation considered young, and yet enmeshed in its first Civil War at the time of the park's construction, could not compete with the perceived richness and historic depth of "European culture" (as if there was one). The turn to its natural resources or "wilderness" provided a commodity that in its grandeur could be manipulated into urban green spaces and then later preserved and conserved in national parks and federally protected wilderness spaces. They (re-)created in their own image, a place that reflected elite values and the preferred identity of both the nation and the city:

The space is ample; the ways and means abundant; the public spirit is broad; the heart of the people is in the work—*money, genius, taste, purpose, and all other elements of power* are at hand to make the Central Park one of the most charming and varied Arcadias which the world has ever seen.⁴⁷

Emerging concepts of leisure and recreation were at play as well in the contested visions and spaces of urban parks. "As public parks proliferated in cities throughout the nineteenth century," Heath Schenker notes, "they represented this newly guaranteed right to leisure for a much broader public, including working men and women. Public parks were a potent symbol of the more equitable distribution of leisure."⁴⁸ While Olmsted sought to make experiences of nature available for leisure to all, including the working class and poor, he arranged and managed the park in ways that dictated his understanding of recreation as supported by the Board of Commissioners. Restrictions on what types of activity would be allowed on Sundays reflected denominational divides, cultural biases, classism, and competing notions of recreation and

⁴⁷ Richards, *Guide to the Central Park*, 101. Italics for emphasis are mine.

⁴⁸ Heath Schenker, "Why Urban Parks: A Matter of Equity?" *The George Wright Forum* 19, no. 2 (2002): 41, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43597800>.

propriety.⁴⁹ The no music, no boat rentals, no beer on the Christian Sabbath in effect disproportionately impacted those whose only day off was Sunday—shop keepers, the working class, and the poor—and imposed a distinctively partisan Christian perspective that was also unfriendly to immigrants.

In the park, nature functioned as a civilizing agent by being a catalyst for restoration of body and spirit. In other words, the design of the park leant itself to calming activity, distracting the visitor from the daily stress of city life and labor. A weekend stroll induced the tranquility necessary to return to the grind refreshed until the next outing, thus sustaining the status quo. Visitors from higher socio-economic classes and park authorities modeled and enforced the expected civilizing behavior, which was assumed to be culturally universal. Maintaining order was the responsibility of the Central Park Keepers. Hired to patrol the park and enforce its rules, the keepers were more military than custodial in their presence and function.⁵⁰

A Pastoral and Socially Controlled Eschatology

The privileging of a pastoral, rural experience of nature (meadows, woods, rolling landscapes) communicated a particular spirituality with an embedded theology. Olmsted saw his parks as promoting “unconscious, or indirect recreation.”⁵¹ The inspiration of Congregationalist preacher and theologian Horace Bushnell appears evident here.⁵² In 1842, Bushnell preached a

⁴⁹ For a more detailed description, see Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 254-256.

⁵⁰ For a more detailed description, see Taylor, *The Environment and People*, 288-290.

⁵¹ Frederick Law Olmsted, “Trees in Streets and in Parks: ‘The Highest Value of a Park’; September 1882,” in *Frederick Law Olmsted: Writings on Landscape, Culture, and Society*, ed. Charles Beveridge (The Library of America, 2015), 593.

sermon entitled “Unconscious Influence,” later published in 1852. Olmsted would have been familiar with Bushnell: Bushnell was his neighbor growing up, his pastor, and the mentor of his boyhood friend, philanthropist and social reformer Charles Loring Brace.⁵³ Olmsted, while religious, “had little time for theology . . . He objected in particular to any doctrine that elevated blind faith over sincere exploration of religious ideas, and he believed that good conscience and good works mattered more to one’s ultimate salvation than doctrinal purity or even faith itself.”⁵⁴

In a certain sense, Olmsted’s pastoral style of landscaping was ministerial, in that he understood the designs of his parks to be in service to the holistic health of the city dwellers who visited. His method tapped into Bushnell’s 1842 sermon and the work of Swiss physician Johann Georg von Zimmermann on the power of nature to heal.⁵⁵ In the sermon, Bushnell drew on an imagery from nature, the rising of the sun in the morning, and imagined what would happen should it cease:

Beasts go wild and frantic at the loss of the sun. The vegetable growths turn pale
and die. A chill creeps on, and frosty winds begin to howl across the freezing

⁵² Tony Carnes, “Central Park: The Largest Religious Art Work in New York City,” Part 1, (November 6, 2011) <http://www.nycreligion.info/central-park-largest-religious-art-work-city/>, and “Central Park: The Largest Religious Art Work in New York City,” Part 2 (November 9, 2011), <http://www.nycreligion.info/central-park-largest-religious-art-work-york-city-part-2-series-god-nyc-gardens/>, God in NYC Gardens Series, *A Journey through NYC Religions*.

⁵³ Stephen O'Connor, *Orphan Trains: The Story of Charles Loring Brace and the Children He Saved and Failed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

⁵⁴ O'Connor, *Orphan Trains*, 28.

⁵⁵ Charles E. Beveridge, “Olmsted: His Essential Theory,” National Association for Olmsted Parks, <http://www.olmsted.org/the-olmsted-legacy/olmsted-theory-and-design-principles/olmsted-his-essential-theory>.

earth. Colder, and yet colder, is the night. The vital blood, at length, of all creatures stops congealed. Down goes the frost towards the earth's centre.⁵⁶

In response, Bushnell contrasted that profound impact with the subtlety of the daily dawn: “It makes no shock or scar. It would not wake an infant in his cradle.”⁵⁷ This imagery illustrated the power of unconscious influence, the ability to exact change in an unobtrusive manner such that others do not realize “any influence exercised or received. And thus our life and conduct are ever propagating themselves, by a law of social contagion, throughout the circles and time in which we live.”⁵⁸ This is what Olmsted sought to accomplish through his scenic (re-)creations.

It is under similar conditions to these that we find in nature that class of scenery... which is termed pastoral. It consists of combinations of trees, standing singly or in groups, and casting their shadows over broad stretches of turf, or repeating their beauty by reflection upon the calm surface of pools, and the predominant associations are in the highest degree tranquilizing and grateful, as expressed by the Hebrew poet: “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters.”⁵⁹

One of the few direct biblical references in Olmsted’s written work, this text most likely connects to the influence of Brooklyn Congregationalist preacher, pastor, abolitionist, and social

⁵⁶ Horace Bushnell, “Unconscious Influence: A Sermon” (London, UK: Partridge and Oakey, 1852), 10, <https://archive.org/stream/unconsciousinfl00bushgoog#page/n14/mode/2up>.

⁵⁷ Bushnell, “Unconscious Influence” 11.

⁵⁸ Bushnell, 4.

⁵⁹ Olmsted, Vaux & Co., *Preliminary Report*, 13.

reformer Henry Ward Beecher. Olmsted had attended Beecher's sermons in Brooklyn on several occasions and was familiar enough with Beecher that he had been invited to write on the clergyman's "love of nature" in 1887.⁶⁰ Beecher's sermon that included his reflections on Psalm 23 may have caught Olmsted's attention for a number of reasons including its resonance with Bushnell's concept of unconscious influence, its nature references, and its ability to emit "truths of peace and consolation that will never be absent from the world."⁶¹ Beecher introduces the psalm with reference to its brevity and a comparison that highlights its impact and unobtrusiveness:

As when one, walking the winter street, sees the door opened for some one to enter, and the red light streams a moment forth, and the forms of gay children are running to greet the comer, and genial music sounds, though the door shuts and leaves the night black, yet it cannot shut back again all that the eye, the ear, the heart, and the imagination have seen.⁶²

⁶⁰ See the letter and commentary in Ethan Carr, Amanda Gagel, and Michael Shapiro, eds., *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, Vol. 8 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 373-374. Olmsted declined the invitation on the basis that he had not had conversations with Beecher on the topic and that he was uncomfortable as a writer outside of his field. It is my theory that Beecher's sermons on Psalm 23 that led in part to its popular reception at the time influenced Olmsted's inclusion of the psalm verse. The influence of the Bushnell sermon on Olmsted indicated that he spent time not only listening but reading sermons that struck a chord with him. I cite this as a precedent.

⁶¹ Henry Ward Beecher, *Life Thoughts* (Boston, MA: Philips, Sampson, and Company, 1859), 9, <https://archive.org/stream/lifethoughtsgath00beecrich#page/8/mode/2up/search/Psalm>. Sermon as cited in William Holladay, *The Psalms Through Three Thousand Years* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress, 1993), Kindle Edition, Location 5989.

⁶² Beecher, *Life Thoughts*, 8, cited in Holladay, *The Psalms*, Kindle Locations 5986-5988.

Beecher describes the psalm as “the nightingale of the psalms . . . small, of a homely feather, singing shyly out of obscurity.”⁶³ He sees its role as a traveling troubadour “who on his way through all lands, singing in the language of every nation, driving away trouble.”⁶⁴ He proclaims a litany of the psalm’s ministrations, among them:

It has comforted the noble host of the poor. It has sung courage to the army of the disappointed. It has poured balm and consolation into the heart of the sick, of captives in dungeons, of widows in their pinching griefs, of orphans in their loneliness.⁶⁵

Besides the obvious connections between Psalm 23 and the design features of Olmsted’s park aesthetics—pastures (v.2), still waters (v.2), paths (v.3)—there is the restorative recreational dimension—rest (v.2), refreshes soul (v. 3), walk without fear (v. 4). It is not a stretch to imagine that the city, with its threats to life, sanity, security, morality, and health would have been interpreted by Olmsted to be the “valley of death” outside the boundaries of the park. If Olmsted did not, others certainly did. In 1872 John Francis Richmond, a Methodist minister, compared “the city to the capital of Hell in *Paradise Lost* and the park to Eden.”⁶⁶

The liberal gospel of Bushnell, Beecher, and other Protestant reformers of the age was one that moved “toward a new emphasis on the goodness of God’s creation, on the human life of Jesus as an influence for good, and on a hope for the progressive amelioration of the affairs of

⁶³ Beecher, *Life Thoughts*, 9, cited in Holladay, Kindle Location 5990.

⁶⁴ Beecher, *Life Thoughts*, 9, cited in Holladay, Kindle Location 5993.

⁶⁵ Beecher, *Life Thoughts*, 9, cited in Holladay, Kindle Locations 5995-5997.

⁶⁶ Mark Stoll, *Inherit the Holy Mountain: Religion and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 97.

humankind.”⁶⁷ In 1846, Olmsted wrote, “I want to make myself useful in the world, to make others happy, to help advance the condition of Society, and hasten the preparation for the Millennium, as well as other things too numerous to mention.”⁶⁸ Through his parks, Olmsted sought to facilitate his millennial desire. He encoded into the design of Central Park (and others like Prospect Park in Brooklyn) an eschatological vision of a space accessible to all that reflected “a specimen of God's handiwork.”⁶⁹ In this bordered space, the classes intermingled, tired workers found rest, immigrants assimilated. In this space of the well-behaved, there is no beer on Sunday, there are no squatters ever, because humans are always visitors only. The rural landscape was established as the ideal, reinforced by the boundaries that effectively kept the city out yet controlled humans and nature within. Instead of structurally addressing the social problems that made the city stressful, such as poverty, overcrowding, discrimination, disparity of wealth, racism, xenophobia, labor issues—Olmsted’s assumption was that the problem was not the system but the moral inadequacy of immigrants, the working class, the poor, African Americans. Totally dismissed were those dislocated by the process of creating the public space which, by the nation’s own democratic principles, must be accessible. Resistance would come

⁶⁷ Holladay, *The Psalms*, Kindle Locations 6027-6028.

⁶⁸ Frederick Law Olmsted to Frederick Kingsbury, cited in Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. and Theodora Kimbel, eds., *Frederick Law Olmsted, Landscape Architect, 1822-1903: Early Years and Experiences* (New York, NY: Knickerbocker Press, 1922), 77, <https://archive.org/stream/fredericklawolms00olm#page/n7/mode/2up/search/Millennium>.

⁶⁹ Frederick Law Olmsted, in Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. and Theodora Kimbel, eds., *Frederick Law Olmsted, Landscape Architect, 1822-1903: Early Years and Experiences* Two Volumes in One. (New York, NY: Benjamin Blom, 1970), 46 of Volume 2, 224 of 806, https://archive.org/stream/fredericklawolms00olms_0#page/n223/mode/2up.

when the rules would eventually prove to be unenforceable and other cultural realities claimed and reshaped these spaces, conceiving them as fluid.

Why spend this much time considering Olmsted? Because he continues to matter in reflections on the environment in ways that do not critically take on some of his assumptions. In a 2016 article on Olmsted in *The Atlantic*, the author, Nathaniel Rich, concludes “But Olmsted, the master of the form, has left behind a clear instruction manual. From the grave he urges us to use our increasingly sophisticated tools to make our global landscape more beautiful—more ‘natural.’”⁷⁰ Through his (re-)creation for recreation, Olmsted curated nature in the city in ways that implicitly suggested that humans were not part of the ecosystem but merely visitors, and that some humans were expendable in the process. This same sentiment continued as the urban park movement helped inspire the wilderness movement, where once again “wilderness” by definition implied no inhabitants, a pristine and people-less environment—a perspective with destructive and painful consequences for the indigenous peoples of what became the U.S.A. This perspective was enshrined in law in 1964 when the federal government officially recognized and defined wilderness as “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.”⁷¹ Among the primary purposes for the protection of wilderness is that these lands may be set aside for the “enjoyment of the American people.”⁷² Echoes of a sentiment expressed by John Muir after a visit to New York City almost a century

⁷⁰ Nathaniel Rich, “When Parks Were Radical,” *The Atlantic*, September 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/09/better-than-nature/492716/>.

⁷¹ The Wilderness Act of 1964, Pub. L. No. 88-577, 16 U.S.C. 1131-1136, Sec.2.c.

⁷² The Wilderness Act, Sec.2.a.

earlier should raise concerns. Muir, founder and president of the Sierra Club, and considered a pioneer of the environmental movement commented, “Often I thought I would like to explore the city if, like a lot of wild hills and valleys, it was clear of inhabitants.”⁷³

RE-IMAGINING TIME: A TURN TO THE ANTHROPOCENE

Locating the Anthropocene

At the turn of the 21st century, geologists began contemplating formal adoption of the Anthropocene as a chronostratigraphic unit to be added to the Geological Time Scale.⁷⁴ Supporters proposed that evidence in the sedimentary record clearly indicated “two distinct stratigraphic episodes since 11,700 years ago, one that might reasonably be described as the Holocene (up until the mid-20th century) and the other as the Anthropocene (since the mid-20th century).”⁷⁵ The focus of the naming of a new epoch in Earth history was the discernible

⁷³ John Muir and Graham White, *The Wilderness Journeys* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Canongate Classics, 1999), 88.

⁷⁴ Jan Zalasiewicz, Colin N. Waters, Alexander P. Wolfe, et al, “Making the Case for a Formal Anthropocene Epoch: An Analysis of Ongoing Critiques,” *Newsletters on Stratigraphy* 50, no. 2 (2017): 206. In this article, geologists present a comprehensive look at critiques and respond to them based on stratigraphic evidence they claim supports making the Anthropocene a formal chronostratigraphic unit that should be added to the Geological Time Scale (by the International Commission on Stratigraphy). The term “Anthropocene” is attributed by many to Nobel laureate in chemistry Paul Crutzen; a brief discussion of its antecedents and usage appears on pages 207-209 of the article cited. For more resources, see Working Group on the Anthropocene, Subcommittee on Quaternary Stratigraphy, <http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/workinggroups/anthropocene/>. At a more popular level, see the resources provided in the annotated bibliography at “Your Guide to All Things Anthropocene: Documenting an Era of Manmade Change,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, January 2017, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/your-guide-all-things-anthropocene-180960599/#sJse5fAs88Zg1gr0.99>.

⁷⁵ Zalasiewicz et al, “Making the Case,” 207. To get a sense of perspective of geochronology, see the graphic at The Geology Society of America, 2009 Geologic Time Scale, reprinted in

influence of human activity as documentable on the geologic record based on “the scale, nature, pace and novelty of human impact...and not the fact that humans are currently the main driving force of change.”⁷⁶

The concept of the Anthropocene gained currency in other disciplines outside of its original context as a debate internal to the field of geology.⁷⁷ Some scholars suggest that a transdisciplinary, holistic approach is preferable in that it considers psychological and societal complexities, such that “the concept of the Anthropocene has implications far beyond the spectrum of geological sciences into social, political, legal, psychological, philosophical, and cultural disciplines, as well as the arts.”⁷⁸ They caution, however, that in this case researchers are

Stratigraphical Charts for the Quaternary, Subcommittee on Quaternary Stratigraphy, <http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/charts/>.)

⁷⁶ Zalasiewicz et al., “Making the Case,” 221. A helpful interactive graphic is available at Howard Hughes Medical Institute, “The Anthropocene: Human Impact on the Environment,” *BioInteractive*, <http://media.hhmi.org/biointeractive/click/anthropocene/>.

⁷⁷ For a wider ranging and comprehensive view of the use of the expression, see Yadvinder Malhi, “The Concept of the Anthropocene,” *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 42 (October 2017): 77-104, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-environ-102016-060854>.

⁷⁸ Sjoerd J. Kluiving and Arthur Hamel, “How Can Archaeology Help Us Unravel the Anthropocene,” in *Molding the Planet Human Niche Construction at Work, RCC Perspectives*, no. 5 (2016): 55, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26241404>. See also, as examples from other disciplines, Sabine Wilke, “Anthropocenic Poetics Ethics and Aesthetics in a New Geological Age,” *RCC Perspectives*, No. 3, *Anthropocene: Envisioning the Future of the Age of Humans* (2013): 67-74, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26240510>; Nina Möllers, “Cur(at)ing the Planet—How to Exhibit the Anthropocene and Why,” *RCC Perspectives*, no. 3, *Anthropocene: Envisioning the Future of the Age of Humans* (2013): 57-66, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26240509>; Andrew Brooks, Kate Fletcher, Robert A. Francis, Emma Dulcie Rigby and Thomas Roberts, “Fashion, Sustainability, and the Anthropocene,” *Utopian Studies* 28, no. 3, Special Issue: Utopia and Fashion (2017): 482-504, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/utopianstudies.28.3.0482>.

truly embedded as more than participant-observers to the extent that as humans we become both subject and object of our own investigation: we study ourselves—with all of our inherent biases.⁷⁹

Interpretations of the Anthropocene range from those who assess it as positive or negative because of what they perceive as anthropocentric privilege to others who “read the epoch as situating the human as one planetary force among others in deep time”—in other words, challenging human exceptionalism in a turn to nonhuman subjectivity.⁸⁰ No matter the position, what appears incontrovertible is the reality that human agency has altered the planet, though the time frame, degree, meaning, and implications of this reality and responses to it remain debatable.

Because the Anthropocene “focuses on human beings as *dramatis personae* but situates them firmly in and of the natural world,” Austin Roberts writes, this raises theological as well as “fundamental philosophical and ethical questions.”⁸¹ For theology, this provides opportunities to examine, deconstruct, and critically reassess underlying assumptions and claims about Christian Anthropology and Creation.⁸² This scrutiny includes these assumptions’ and claims’ impact on

⁷⁹ Kluiwing and Hamel, “How Can Archaeology Help Us,” 55.

⁸⁰ Austin J. Roberts, “Intersubjectivity in the Anthropocene: Toward an Earthbound Theology,” *Open Theology* 4, no. 1 (2018): 76, <https://doi.org/10.1515/oph-2018-0006>.

⁸¹ Möllers, “Cur(at)ing the Planet,” 57.

⁸² Among some of the more recent scholarship of theologians, religion scholars, and ethicists addressing the Anthropocene, see, for example: Celia Deane-Drummond, Sigurd Bergmann, and Markus Vogt, *Religion in the Anthropocene* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017); Michael S. Northcott, *A Political Theology of Climate Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2013); Willis Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity* (Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2013). The purpose of this article is

teachings and practices as they affect relationships, particularly between the Creator and creatures, and creatures to each other, positively manifest in kinship, interdependence, and sustainability and negatively exhibited in dominion, exploitation, and destruction.

The Apocalyptic Edge of the Anthropocene

The eschatological dimensions of this discussion are unavoidable because the construction of the Anthropocene, in all of its permutations, involves interpretations of time and commentaries on beginnings and ends, and is significant for the futuring of the planet on local, global, and cosmic scales. An apocalyptic vernacular of catastrophe seems inevitable in light of the consequences of human interventions and omissions: climate change, global warming, nuclear threat, extinctions of species, deforestation, eugenic potential of genetic engineering and screening.⁸³ Images of apocalypse abound from environmental movements to popular culture.⁸⁴

not to survey theological and ethical positions, or to provide a comprehensive overview of the state of the question, or to develop a Latin@ theology of the Anthropocene.

⁸³ For example, screening to identify Down syndrome prenatally has become accessible and less risky. Some fear the elimination of people born with Down syndrome through “de-selection” of fetuses with a Down syndrome diagnosis. This is an ethical concern as indicated by “termination rates varying around the world from about 67 percent in the United States to an average of 92 percent in Europe.” Renate Lindeman, “Down Syndrome Screening Isn't About Public Health: It's About Eliminating a Group of People.” *Washington Post*, June 16, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/06/16/down-syndrome-screening-isnt-about-public-health-its-about-eliminating-a-group-of-people/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.765d06d4b6d1. See also Antonio Regalado, “Engineering the Perfect Baby,” *MIT Technology Review*, March 5, 2015, <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/535661/engineering-the-perfect-baby/>.

⁸⁴ For example, environmental destruction is a recurring theme in the music of the San Diego deathgrind metal band Cattle Decapitation. The lyrics of the tracks on their 2015 album *The Anthropocene Extinction* and the images in the music videos reflect a violent and catastrophic apocalypticism. The videos should come with a trigger warning. Album lyrics, tracks, and music videos available via links accessible here: “Manufactured Extinct Lyrics,” Lyrics.com,

Among the envisioned ends is a reconquista of sorts where nature reclaims what has been defiled:

If rising sea levels inundate cities and ports, and droughts destroy much presently viable cropland, the Anthropocene will potentially be an era in which human power over nature is greatly reduced. In these circumstances nature will wrest back control over the boundary between earth and sea from human sea defences, and over agricultural lands from the irrigation schemes, terracing, and crop rotations of farmers.⁸⁵

Another scenario sees the Anthropocene as an unending disaster with irreversible extinctions on the horizon, including the possibility of the obliteration of humanity because “the climatic and geo-chemical transformations will take thousands of years to undo, if they are undone at all.”⁸⁶ This perspective treats the era as one of human vulnerability, not mastery,

STANDS4 LLC, 2018, <https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/32069998>. For a scholarly article on this band, see Erik van Ooijen, “Giving Life Harmoniously: Animal Inversion in Cattle Decapitation,” *Helvete: A Journal of Black Metal Theory* 2 (2015): 73-92. This band was recently in the national news because one of the Native American brothers who was pulled from a tour at Colorado State University was wearing a shirt featuring the band. See Niraj Chokshi, “Native American Brothers Pulled from Campus Tour After Nervous Parent Calls Police,” *New York Times*, May 5, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/05/us/native-american-brothers-colorado.html>.

⁸⁵ Northcott, *A Political Theology of Climate Change*, 23. See also Michael Northcott, “Eschatology in the Anthropocene: From the Chronos of Deep Time to the Kairos of the Age of Humans,” in *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis*, ed. Clive Hamilton and Christophe Bonneuil (Taylor & Francis, 2015), 104.

⁸⁶ Nicholas Beuret and Gareth Brown, “‘The Walking Dead’: The Anthropocene as a Ruined Earth,” *Science as Culture* 26, no. 3 (2016): 330-354, DOI: [10.1080/09505431.2016.1257600](https://doi.org/10.1080/09505431.2016.1257600). Beuret and Brown interpret the ruined earth of the Anthropocene through the TV and comic book series “The Walking Dead.”

where the goal is now survival, enduring the inevitable rather than being able to repair or change it. The only appropriate response in a present with no future is to salvage, a sort of recycling of the ruins, a dwelling with and in the disaster:

Salvage starts with the world as it is found: it works with the ruins of the Anthropocene, the toxic drifts and broken infrastructures. The existing inequities of material wealth and distribution, the ruins of the present world, form the differentiated grounds of survival.”⁸⁷

The instability that characterizes the Anthropocene, “brings the more-than-human world out from the background of social life, not as an object of concern but as a locus of unpredictable actions and events.”⁸⁸

Waiting Out the Misanthropocene in the City

Among the paradoxes of the Anthropocene is that while it seemingly elevates the human as a major force that has altered the geologic record, that human agency is responsible for impending planetary catastrophe. On one hand, this renaming of the epoch extols and reinforces human superiority; on the other it underscores human fragility, now made more vulnerable to the vagaries of nature somehow set in uncontrollable and destructive motion. The exact date the epoch commences is contested, yet each proposed candidate is weighted with ideological baggage and assumptions of privilege. The Atomic Age, the Industrial Revolution, the Age of Conquest and Colonization (the so-called “Discovery”)—each points to the moves and decisions of powerful elites. The only possible contenders that do not do so propose a renaming of the

⁸⁷ Beuret and Brown, “The Walking Dead.”

⁸⁸ Beuret and Brown.

Holocene epoch, which began almost 12,000 years ago after the last glacial period, or suggest pushing the time back to when our human ancestors first entered earth's story in the Pleistocene epoch, several hundreds of thousands of years ago. In the latter case, humanity, as an undifferentiated abstraction, is responsible for the catastrophe. Easily lost in that metric are the powerless, the disposable, the ones done unto. Who exactly is the "anthro" in the Anthropocene? Economist Raj Patel wryly notes:

In Western politics, catastrophe has been used by the left and right as an alibi for misanthropic, racist, and cold-blooded policy. Stalinists and survivalists unite behind the idea that, before things get better, society has to hit bottom. After that, the guardians of post-apocalyptic knowledge can come to save the day.

Impending catastrophe has been an alibi for everything from Year Zero to cult suicides.

Herein lies the danger. We're surrounded by catastrophic narratives of almost every political persuasion, tales that allow us to sit and wait while humanity's End Times work themselves out. The Anthropocene can very easily become the Misanthropocene.⁸⁹

At the same time, beginning the Anthropocene with the emergence of our shared human ancestors contains the potential to explore other ways and other wisdoms in which humans did manage to live in subsistence relationships in the so-called uninhabitable spaces. What stories and practices will the remains of the human cities in the rain forests of Latin America and

⁸⁹ Raj Patel, "The Misanthropocene," *Earth Island Journal*, Spring 2013, <http://www.earthisland.org/journal/index.php/eij/article/misanthropocene/>.

Southeast Asia yield?⁹⁰ At the very least, may it result in our letting go of our theological obsessions for purity and perfection, imposed as a condition on wilderness by equating “pristine” with the absence of humans.

Humans have yet to figure out how to behave intraspecifically in manners respectful of dignity and conducive to our shared surviving and thriving. How might abstract conceptions of humanity that seek to situate our species into greater networks of creatureliness risk further marginalization of those already made vulnerable by being othered, displaced, disposed, erased? Any ethics of the Anthropocene cannot avoid a commitment to a preferential option for those made poor and vulnerable. Discourses arising from within the Anthropocene seem to forget that for a significant portion of humanity, the narratives have long been of struggle and survival, of catastrophes brought down on particular populations at the hands of other humans and institutionalized over time and through practices embedded in the processes and structures of socialization.

In the literature about the Anthropocene, the city as lived experience and as metaphor is underrepresented. As ecosystems, cities are intersecting spheres of diversity and hybridity. Human diversity is part of a greater biodiversity represented in urban life that at its best can reflect eschatological convivencia. This wisdom is coded as well into the Book of Revelation, written to seven cities, about the misanthropocene of their day. John holds forth a vision of una nueva creación, a city, with a river of life-giving water running down the center of the street, and a tree of life on either side, a bountiful perennial with leaves that serve as healing balm, as medicine for the nations (Rev 22:10-2). There are no boundaries around the trees and water,

⁹⁰ Tom Clynes, “Exclusive: Laser Scans Reveal Maya ‘Megalopolis’ Below Guatemalan Jungle,” *National Geographic*, February 1, 2018, <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2018/02/maya-laser-lidar-guatemala-pacunam/>.

insulating them from the city; healing occurs within the city. The specificity of the detail about its dimensions can be interpreted an invitation to make it so instead of sit and await a fantasy. The city's permanently open gates signify that all are welcome except those who choose actions that ultimately threaten and harm life in community (Rev 21:10-21, 25-27). In the Apocalypse, which is survival literature for a community that was facing its own imperially created catastrophe, dwelling with the catastrophe and recycling among the ruins are not the only option. There is the accompanying God who chooses to make divine dwelling with humanity, especially with those who are struggling on the underside. "In the public square of Revelation's late first century setting," Jean-Pierre Ruiz writes, "politics was religion and religion was politics. Revelation calls its addressees to resistance, not to retreat."⁹¹ In the presence of this counter-narrative, is it indeed "curious that God's revelation tells us that the fullness of humanity and of history is realized in a city"?⁹²

⁹¹ Jean-Pierre Ruiz, "The Mighty City and the Holy City: John's Apocalypse at the Intersections of Power and Praise," *The Living Pulpit*, August 2015, <http://www.pulpit.org/2015/08/introduction-metropolis-the-city-in-the-bible/>.

⁹² Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 71, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.