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Conclusion: The City as Body, the Earth as Body, and the Body as Earth

The city has been figured in a variety of ways as we have seen in many of the preceding chapters. These have ranged from abyss to jungle, nether world to hell, sublime heights to swampy depths, and so on. The ways in which the city is figured say much about the politics of the periods in which the figuration was made. Yet these historical shifts say a lot not only about those periods, but also about the city, how it has been thought from the past into the present and how it will be thought in the future. In this concluding chapter I look at one of the central ways in which the city has been figured, the city as body, and variations on this theme. I also relate this trope to a much older one of the earth as body and the body as earth and argue for a rapprochement between them in such a way that the city can become more “sustainable,” in other words, live in greater psycho- and biosymbiosis in its bioregion and with the living earth.

In the seventeenth century John Donne in his first *Satrye* evokes “the sinewes of a cities mistique bodie” (cited by Smith, 2012: 170). In two hundred years the city went from a mystical body to a disease of the body politic. For some early-nineteenth-century writers, such as William Cobbett, London is a wen, “a swelling sore that simultaneously drained and corrupted the surrounding countryside” (as Graeme Davison (1983: 366) defined it). A wen is a grotesque excrescence on the surface of the body politic (as Mikhail Bakhtin might have put it). For later writers in the same century London is “a tumour, an elephantiasis sucking into its gorged system half the life” of the country (Lord Roseberry cited by Howard, 1902: unnp). London is a parasitic cancer in the depths of the body politic. For Howard in the early twentieth century

“crowded, ill-ventilated, unplanned, unwieldy, unhealthy cities” were “ulcers on the very face of our beautiful island” (98). For some early-twentieth-century writers, such as Benjamin and Freud (as we saw in the earlier chapter on Berlin), the underside of the city is both fascinating and horrifying, and figured in bodily terms. Recently for some early-twenty-first-century writers the back blocks and slums of the hypermodern city—characterized as regions of rust and ruin, or of decay and decomposition steeped in feral swamps—are fascinating. These twenty-first-century writers express anxiety or dread about the city like their nineteenth-century counterparts.

Rather than this fraught figuration, I propose seeing the city as a body, not only with parks as lungs as in the nineteenth-century cliché of the city, but also with its twentieth-century skyscrapers as the head and brain, the water supply and sewerage systems as the esophagus and intestines, the rivers as arteries, the wetlands as kidneys, liver, and placenta, the “mouth” and the estuary of the river as the anus and bowels, slums as a sore to be treated and cared for, not bled or lanced in the gentrification of slum clearance, and so on. Rather than figuring slums as swamps in pejorative terms as places of disease and horror, I propose seeing them as artificial wetlands whose livability for their residents would be improved by improving their ecological functionality as kidneys, liver, and placenta, as places of hope and new life.

Manuel de Landa (2000: 20; see also 106) sees “cities as ecosystems” and as “parasitic entities.” He goes on to point out

the error of comparing cities to organisms, especially when the metaphor is meant to imply (as it has in the past) that both exist in a state of internal equilibrium, or homeostasis. Rather, urban centers and living creatures must be seen as *different* dynamical systems operating far from equilibrium, that is, traversed by more or less intense flows of matter-energy that provoke their unique metamorphoses ... From this point of view cities arise from the flow of matter-energy. (28; emphasis in the original)

So do bodies and lands in the Taoist view of the body and the earth arise from, or *are*, the flow of matter-energy, or *chi* (see Giblett, 2008a: chapter 10). Arguably the body is not in a state of internal equilibrium, or homeostasis, either, except in the static view of modern Western European mechanical medicine (see Giblett, 2008a: chapter 2). Similarly wetland cities, or formerly

wetland cities, arise from the dynamic flow of matter-energy in the wetlands and by the rivers on or by which they were founded. Forests, wetlands, cities, and bodies are all dynamic flows of matter-energy.

Richard Sennett (1994) in *Flesh and Stone* extensively explores the city as body, in particular the trope of the body politic. Early on in his study he cites John of Salisbury who, in 1159, in *Polticraticus* thought of “the city’s palace or cathedral . . . as its head, the central market as its stomach, the city’s hands and feet as its houses” (23). Sennett later reprises his discussion of John of Salisbury with specifically “the merchants” as “the stomach of society. It was the greedy organ of the body, as of the body politic” (156). Typically for the Middle Ages, in *Polticraticus* John associates what le Goff (1989: 18) calls “the ignoble convolutions of the belly and the intestines . . . which contain a ferment of illnesses and vices” with “the economy and, more precisely, money handling.” The intestines were what le Goff describes as “cast *down*, below the belt, to the region occupied by the shameful parts of the body” (16; his emphasis). In Bakhtin’s terms, the digestive, excretory, and sexual organs comprised the grotesque lower bodily stratum. They were associated with the grotesque lower earthly stratum of swamps and marshes.

Following in Sennett’s footsteps, Peter Ackroyd (2001: 1) begins his biography of London with a prologue on “The City as Body.” In it he notes that “the byways of the city resemble thin veins and its parks are like lungs.” Likening parks to lungs was a cliché of nineteenth-century writing about cities. It was also used by le Corbusier ([1929] 1987: vi) in the twentieth century, albeit within scare quotation marks. According to Melosi (2008: 1), Olmsted is “credited with calling trees ‘the lungs of the city.’” Yet by no means was Olmsted the first person to do so as William Windham (cited by Smith, 2012: 285) stated in the House of Commons in 1808 that “the parks are the lungs of London” and in 1883 the Select Committee on Public Walks figured what Smith calls “urban green spaces” as the “lungs of the city” (285).

Figuring parks as lungs was the justification and founding trope for “public open space” as a means for breathing fresher air than the bad air found in the closed and fetid courts of slums in particular. Likening the byways of the city to thin veins harks back to another cliché: that of roads and rivers, and later canals and railways as the arteries of commerce of the city and of the body politic, the nation, more generally. In the early twentieth century for

Berliner Herbert Jhering (cited by Smith, 2012: 253) “the stage was a respiratory organ for the city, a part of its very body.” At the time Berlin had many parks, three opera houses, fifty theatres, and umpteen music halls. All of them helped to keep the city alive and breathing. Without them the city may have died, like the wetlands on which it was built. In this regard, these “lungs” of the city were an artificial and mechanical respiratory system. For Smith “the city is a machine” despite his use of bodily metaphors (297). For him, the dead machine is “brought to life by our needs and desires,” a bit like Frankenstein’s monster or d’Lisle Adam’s cyborg Hadaly.

Similarly the body is a machine for Descartes (see Giblett, 2008a: 23–24) in the seventeenth century and for Mumford (1934: 32) in the twentieth century, for whom the body is “a sort of microcosm of the machine: the arms are levers, the lungs are bellows, the eyes are lenses, the heart is a pump, the fist is a hammer, the nerves are a telegraph system with a central station.” The city is a body and its machines are organs for Walter Rathenau writing in 1912:

In their structure and mechanics, all larger cities of the white world are identical. Situated at the midpoint of a web of rails, they shoot their petrified street-threads over the countryside. Visible and invisible networks of rolling traffic crisscross and undermine the vehicular ravines and twice daily pump human bodies from the limbs to the heart. A second, third, fourth network distributes water, heat and power, an electrical bundle of nerves carries the resonances of the spirit. (Cited by Sloterdijk, 1987: 436)

One hundred years later, for Smith (2012: 301) telecommunications are the “central nervous system” of the body, or machine, or cyborg, of the city designed, in the case of New Songdo in South Korea, to combine the elements of the city into “a single urban organism, a sentient city” capable of thinking, feeling, and suffering electronically.

For Smith (2012: 46), streets are “the vital human arteries of the city” whereas for Brooks Atkinson (2012: 80) “roads have become arteries—hardened arteries—of traffic.” The street is for people whereas the road is now for traffic and not people. Moreover, streets for Smith (2012: 86, 194, and 293) are “channels for the city’s life blood [of] its people” whereas “electricity is the life blood of the vertical city” and “technological networks” are “subterranean veins and arteries that sustain life in the urban body.” These networks

include arteries of the lifeblood of water and veins of the wastes of sewerage and its nervous system of telecommunications and electricity. Under the sidewalks or footpaths of New York for Daley (1959: 11) lie “the city’s veins and arteries,” “the unseen roots,” to switch metaphor, of “incredible complexity and awesome power,” which “nourish New York. Without them the city could not exist.”

Electricity sublimates the life of the horizontal and slimy streets into the vertical and sublime skyscraper. “The architecture of the vertical city,” as Smith (2012: 196) puts it, “inspired the kind of sublime awe previously only experienced in mountains or canyons.” Skyscrapers were indeed “man-made” mountains with “man-made” canyons between them. They were the artificial analogue of the wilderness sublime. Electricity makes it possible to transcend the messy life of the people in the streets into the clean and ethereal extraterrestrial world of the skyscraper rising above what is below. The Woolworth Building, “New York’s paradigmatic skyscraper of the early twentieth century,” was for A. G. Gardiner (cited by Smith, 2012: 197 and 198) a vertical street “miraculously turned skyward by some violent geological ‘fault.’” New York’s skyscrapers also rose from swamps. Smith later recycles Gardiner’s figure when he discusses how Venice “rises almost miraculously from the swamps” (220). Electricity was the magical substance that made the miracle possible. Electricity was also sublime (see Giblett, 2008b; 2013: chapter 19).

Skyscrapers are a “man-made” plate tectonics and the vertical manifestation of what Michel Serres (1995: 16) calls “plaque tectonics” in which cities and their populations clash against each other in the great conurbations of the world. These plaques of humanity are reshaping the globe, like plate tectonics. They are also superseding any simplistic notion of an individual subject acting alone in relation to nature, as well as problematizing a hard and fast divide between nature and culture. Plate tectonics are natural, but plaque tectonics are a cultural reconstruction of nature. They are the urban landscape on the surface of the earth.

This plaque, this excrescence on the face, or more precisely in the mouth (which cannot be spat out because it sticks so much, though it may be sloughed off), of the earth, these plates of humanity are not just cities but megalopolises: New York–Philadelphia–Washington; Europe as city;

Newcastle–Sydney–Wollongong; Yanchep–Perth–Mandurah. Cities are not merely malignant cancers on and in the body of the earth, but also artificially constructed benign residential zones for their citizens. They provide shelter and comfort for those able to afford them, but increasingly they are “heat islands” with polluted air in the age of global warming. Cities are the child of the marriage between patriarchal culture, the Law of the Father, and the benign and malignant Mother Nature, in many cases founded on the Great Goddess or Mother of the swamps and marshes.

Ackroyd (2001: 1) relates that when William Harvey, who discovered that the heart is a pump, “walked through the streets he noticed that the hoses of the fire engines spouted water like blood from a cut artery.” Rather than the city, it is the technology of the city that is likened here to the body, or one aspect of it. Perhaps Harvey’s observation was an early step that eventually led him to the discovery that the heart is a pump, which he made from observing pumps at work (see Giblett, 2008: 19). Along similar lines and dealing with unsavory waste, sanitary services for Melosi (2008: 1) are “the circulatory system of the city.” Yet sanitary systems don’t circulate water as the lifeblood of the body of the city. Rather they dispose of solid and liquid waste. Sanitary services are the excretory and urinary disposal systems of the body. They are the artificial waste disposal system that replicates the natural functions of wetlands. They are the colostomy bag for the city from which the bowels of the earth have been removed.

The body as earth and the earth as body are persistent tropes in traditional cultures (see Giblett, 2008a). In previous chapters we have seen how the nineteenth-century city, or at least its slums, were likened to swamps and the city was figured as body. In this chapter I want to conclude by unraveling this tangled figuration. I do so by examining some recent instances beginning with a brochure regarding wetlands in which it says that “wetlands are the heart of our country. They beat to an erratic ancient rhythm and when they fill, a burst of life pulses out into the surrounding landscape. Rivers are the arteries of our landscapes. They nourish a vast country and drive the cycle of life even in areas far away from permanent surface water” (Inland Rivers Network, nd). Elsewhere I have considered wetlands as kidneys, liver, placenta, and uterus for the functions they perform and services they provide in purifying blood and water and giving new life (Giblett, 1996;

2008a: chapter 11; 2009: chapter 11). Considering wetlands as the heart of the earth-body, as this brochure does, presses them into another service as the central pumping organ of water as the lifeblood of the earth and puts another burden on them to perform that service and give that good. Wetlands, however, are not a pump that circulates water from a central station.

Perhaps wetlands are the lymphatic system of the earth-body. Lymph, unlike blood, does not have a pump to circulate fluid around the body. Likening wetlands to the heart can be problematic as there is only one heart in the human body whereas there are many wetlands in the body of the earth. The Murray–Darling system in Australia, for instance, does flow with new lifeblood of water when there are sudden downpours, but these big flows are intermittent and this system is by no means the whole of Australia. Lymph relies on muscular action to circulate and water in wetlands circulates because of the action of rain and morphology of land. Lymph can also stagnate in lymphedema as water can stagnate in wetlands. At a seminar on lymphedema that I attended at a public hospital in 2007 the presenter figured lymphedema as a “stagnant swamp” that is “soggy, boggy and sounds horrible.” A stagnant swamp may sound horrible, but it can be a fully functioning native wetland with no actual or potential land pathology unlike lymphedema. It would be more apposite ecologically to figure lymphedema as a dysfunctional wetland modified by human activity, such as surgery akin to landscape engineering, to the point where it becomes a stagnant feral wetland, not a vital native one at all. As the lymph system is “a one-way drainage system cleansing the body by transporting waste from tissue to the bloodstream” and “lymph vessels drain into nodes and then into veins and is filtered by the kidneys,” the lymph system is part of the wetlands of the body.

Just as the human body relies on, and takes in, food, air, and water, and is affected by the qualities of those substances, so is analogously the earth affected by the quality of its air and water. Greenhouse gases are adversely affecting the earth today, have been for some time, and will continue to do so into the future. Greenhouse gases for Phillip Adams (2009: 3) are to earth as cigarette smoking is to the lungs. Adams uses this heuristic trope to liken climate change skeptics or deniers to cigarette companies and smokers who denied the evidence of links between smoking and cancer. Smoke stacks and vehicle exhaust systems emit the “carcinogens” that are giving the lungs of the

earth (and not just the parks of the city) the “cancer” of droughts, floods, and heat. Adams calls for “the planet to give up smoking” as “the planet has lung cancer.” He draws parallels between the cigarette and coal companies in their tactics to deflect blame and not change their ways. Parks may be the lungs of the city, but all bush lands, forests, tundra, and other areas of vegetation are the lungs of the earth.

Thinking the earth as body and the city as part of that body with a range of organs and processes can enable urban earth dwellers to live in a more symbiotic relationship with the earth. Nabokov said tropes are the dreams of speech, and Freud said dreams are the royal road to the unconscious. Tropes lead to the unconscious of culture and the city. Deconstructing and decolonizing the pejorative tropes of the city and the earth (as this book tries to do) and figuring both otherwise in more symbiotic terms may enable city and country dwellers to respect and care for the earth and its wetlands more than we do at the moment. Long live the wetlands!