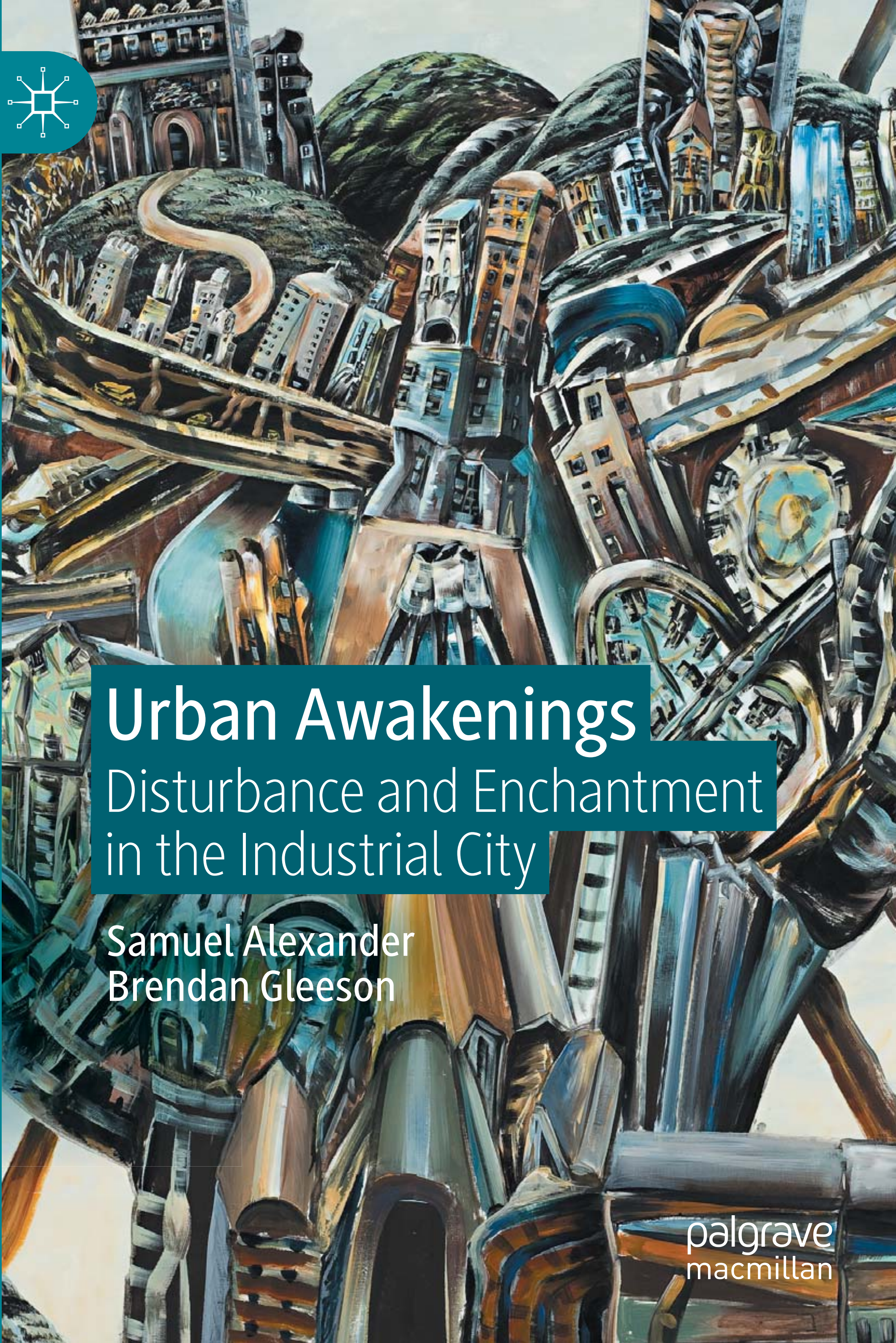

Urban Awakenings

Disturbance and Enchantment in the Industrial City

Samuel Alexander
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Contents

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A Disturbed Book: Bubbles Under the Throne

Dear reader, this is not the book we planned for you. Along the way of its writing, it was blown up—into two parts—by an unforeseen and dramatic turn in the recent course of human history. You may already know what we are talking about. Yes, the global COVID-19 pandemic that surfaced first in the Chinese city of Wuhan and subsequently spread outwards with dizzying swiftness in the early months of 2020. Countless human projects and indeed human lives were suddenly extinguished by the pandemic. Much suffering and loss ensued, both in terms of lives lost and diminished by the horrid touch of the virus, as well as the epic dislocations and depredations that it imposed on social and economic life across the globe. Let us explain what this dramatic turn of events meant for the book we'd thought to present to you.

Urban Awakenings was the name we gave to the project reported in this book, which took form on Wurundjeri land. It was a project conceived in early 2019 as a series of urban investigations by the authors which set out to find novel ways of looking at the contemporary industrial city, in this case the metropolis of Melbourne where we live, capital of the State of Victoria, Australia. We were inspired

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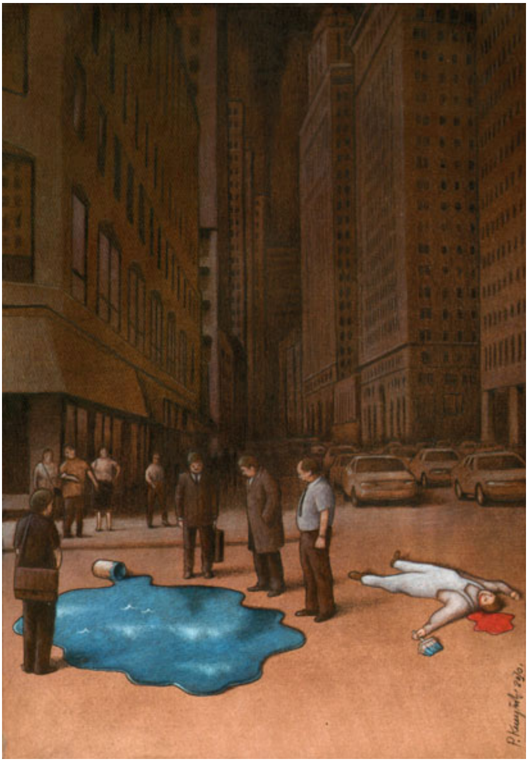

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and guided by the thesis set out in Jane Bennett's 2001 book, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*,[1] which urges a new and critical way of seeing contemporary modernity as a fractured, contradictory, unreasonable, and ultimately mortal dispensation. Far from accepting modernity's dominant narrative of disenchantment, however, Bennett seeks to tell an alter-tale, one that recognises that the world still has the capacity to enchant in ways that she maintains has ethical (and, we will argue, political) significance. We wanted to apply and extend her analysis to the urban landscape, by walking the city with eyes open to the possibility of enchantment—a methodology we describe as 'urban tramping'.[2]

Since its emergence, capitalist modernity has always attempted a ruse on humanity, because it suppresses through its arrogations of 'pure reason' the key restraining Enlightenment value of doubt. Like thinkers such as Hannah Arendt and Ulrich Beck, Jane Bennett urges us to see through the hubris of modernism and assert a radical doubt about its claims to hyperrational order, linear progress, and the ethical detachment of market rule. Her novel approach, unpacked further in forthcoming chapters, is to seek out 'enchantments' in a social dispensation that deceptively imagines itself free of this ancient value. Doing so, we argue, can unsettle the assumption that the global economic order we know today is somehow the natural modern expression of the Enlightenment. By carefully examining and experiencing the diversity of cultural forms, sites, and histories, the countless chinks that exist in capitalism's armour of self-rationalisation can be exposed.

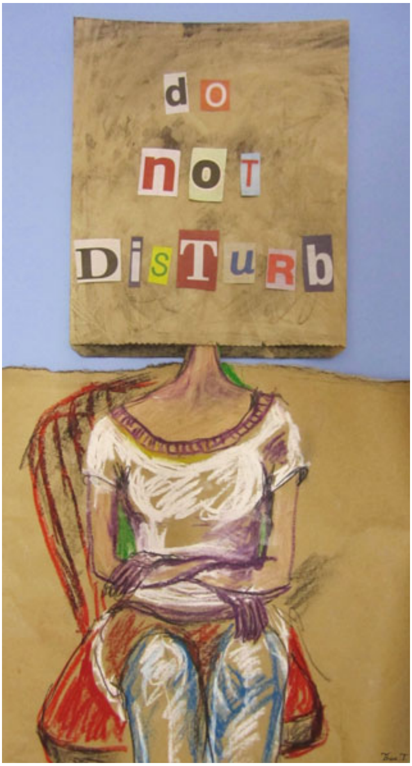
Thus Bennett rather cheekily invites enchantment, normally an anti-modern notion, back onto the agenda, not seeking to reinstate fairies, magic, or superstition, but to give licence to doubt about the claims of capitalism to be the rational, and thus, *natural* expression of modernity. Might there not be other ways to theorise and experience modernity? According to Bennett, to experience the world as merely the mechanical workings of lifeless matter, commodified and traded in a marketplace, is to see the world as disenchanted, and her (and our) concern is that the tendency of modernity to disenchant our lives has destructive social and ethical consequences. It can tempt us 'moderns' to quietly live a life of resignation, apathy, individualism, acquisitiveness, and myopia, leaving people without the necessary 'affective propulsions'[3] required to create purpose in their lives and struggle for a more humane world. A disenchanted culture is one suffering the strange ache of malaise, the cause of which is difficult to identify, like a knot of anxiety that cannot be easily untied.

To actively seek out and appreciate moments of urban enchantment, on the other hand, has ethical potential. It can give people the energy—the impulse—to care and engage, in a world that is desperately in need of ethical and political revaluation and provocation. What Bennett highlights is how the *feelings* one has participate in and shape the *thoughts* one has, and vice versa. And what people feel and think obviously affects how they act, both personally and politically. She wagers that 'to some small but irreducible extent, one must be enamoured with existence and occasionally even enchanted in the face of it in order to be capable of donating some of one's scarce mortal resources to the service of others'.[4] In this way, the interconnections between affect, thought, ethics, and politics become apparent, even if those interconnections always and everywhere remain mysterious and shifting.

We are pointing here to what might be called the affective or even aesthetic dimension of ethics and politics,[5] too often marginalised by the pose of pure reason. One cannot, we argue, even in principle, master all things in life by calculation—either physically or economically—and this critical doubt opens up theoretical space beyond calculation where moments of enchantment might be able to rewire the circuitry of the dominant imaginary and lay the foundations for alternatives to arise. We have found that meditating on and in this territory—this blurry nexus between affect, ethics, and politics—can be enlightening but also discomforting.

Indeed, Bennett begins her treatise by noting that 'a discomforting affect is often what initiates a story, a claim, a thesis'.[6] Or, in the words of political theorist John Holloway: 'The starting point of theoretical reflection is opposition, negativity, struggle…. an inarticulate mumble of discontent'.[7] In our case, a vague sense of urban disenchantment gave birth to an idea for a book, but the process of writing it (as we walked the city) somehow induced a more expansive and visionary mood, a new affective state, on account of what Bennett would call 'the wonder of minor experiences',[8] of which we will be giving account. We see and feel more in the urban landscape than we once did, and in part this book is about how and perhaps why that happened—the process. We have discovered that enchantments can disturb, and disturbances can enchant, from which we inquire: Might such affective and intellectual provocations have the potential to awaken more people from the dogmatic slumber into which our urban age has fallen? Put otherwise, can a disturbed *affect* lead to a genuinely progressive and enchanting *effect*?

Bennett wants us all to look under the shiny bonnet of the neoliberal machine to find the muffled knocks and disturbances that betray its



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smooth running. This is not to question reason but rather to affirm it by resisting the structural urge of capitalism to always naturalise itself as the only feasible modern social form. Nothing in nature preordains capitalism. We know that the (really) great thinkers of the Enlightenment would support this assertion as a rational truth. They would forgive the use of enchantment to confound the cause of naturalisation.

Before we go further, a word about neoliberalism, the atmospheric political construct that whirls through and around our book. This global political project emerged in the Anglophone West during the 1970s, vowing to restore growth and prosperity to a sclerotic capitalist world economy. Geographer David Harvey explains it correctly, however, as an ideologically masked wealth grab by capitalist elites and their adherents.[9] The project has survived all attempts at political censure by weakened and increasingly divided progressive forces. Today, in an urban age, we can speak of neoliberal urbanism as a form of the project that seeks to shackle all city ambitions and interests to the cause of capital expansion and the unequal division of its spoils. With an appeal to problematic definitions of 'efficiency', this zeitgeist defers all major planning and distributive decisions to the dubious wisdom of the market.

The 'industrial city' that we set out to examine in this book has been redefined by this narrow commitment to growth by any means, at any cost. It is a city overlaid with the disenchantments of widening social division and ecocidal urbanisation, and it is a settlement that remains haunted by its colonial history. Our walking ground Melbourne is an artefact, like the many, of neoliberal urbanism, but for many millennia before us these lands were walked, and are still walked, by Australia's Indigenous peoples. We acknowledge from the outset that our project takes place on stolen Aboriginal land and that sovereignty has never been ceded. Today, as you will see, this colonial city showcases many of the trappings of the growth machine economy, including freewheeling high-rise development we term 'vertical sprawl'. This increasingly disenchanted metropolitan ground beckoned our critical attention.

* * *

So, to our project. As urbanists of liberal definition, we authors set out to apply Bennett's thesis to the question of the contemporary industrial city. We thought to reframe the project of critique she urges as a set of material—that is, *spatially enacted*—investigations of our home city Melbourne, in quest for counter-evidence to the claims of contemporary capitalism to be a natural, self-regulating order, freed from the facts of natural ecology and human frailty. We crafted an idea of ourselves as 'urban tramps' who might attempt this critical inquiry. The tramps were to be *freethinking freewalkers* of the city, encumbered only with the duty to look through the mindless objectivity of industrialism towards its troubled, contradictory soul. These irruptions of capitalist reason were to be found in the ranging, mouldering fabrics of the city.

The 'tramp' was to be an original critical identity that distinguished us, while at the same time relating us, to the various traditions of urban observation: *flâneurs*, slum journalists, ethnographers, missioners, psychogeographers, etc.[10] The crafting of this identity was partly inspired by Stephen Graham's 1926 book *The Gentle Art of Tramping*,[11] which laid out a set of desiderata for journeying that refused the dictates and assumptions of the settled life. Graham sought an unsettled life as means for self-realisation, while Bennett wanted to find disruption and contradiction in the everyday fabric of modernity.

We fused the two to create the figure of the 'urban tramp' who would seek out the discomforts and disruptions of modern life so often to be found, if one looked carefully, in the otherwise machinic confidence of the contemporary industrial city. In other words, we set out to sojourn through urban landscapes with the same sense of wonder and critical attention that a nature-walker like Henry David Thoreau embodied as he sauntered through Walden Woods. Nature can enchant and disturb, but so can the city. This book project was therefore conceived as a series of tramps around our city which would be essayed and brought together in a general published consideration that we conceived as *Urban Awakenings*. All this is explained in our early chapters to follow.

What we need to relate now—before you read another word!—is how during the working out of this project the COVID-19 pandemic changed our tramping and our publishing plans. We tell the tale simply and with confidence because the whole disruption, surprisingly (or not!), proved to be a powerful confirmation of our work and the thesis behind it. As it unfolded, the pandemic was yet another historical proof of the vulnerability and contingency of capitalism, especially its latest form, globalised neoliberalism. This huge, sudden superimposition on our project was recognised as an affirmation of its purpose.

In sharp relief our investigations, halfway through their work, encountered a city that suddenly shrugged off the long-settled diktat of neoliberalism. Australian governments at all levels were roused from their laissez-faire slumber to act swiftly and with impressive effect against the crisis. The growth machine economy was forced to a halt, as it was in much of the globe, by a state newly emboldened (or simply compelled) to protect human wellbeing. The whole time-space order of neoliberalism, including its treadmill work regimes, was suspended with great and bewildering effect.

In the contemporary parlance of children and youth, this epic drama ‘broke’ our project. We quickly learned that this was to good effect. The pandemic did this by imposing a new periodisation on our work as we approached publication—a separation of the investigations completed before the crisis (November 2019–February 2020) and those that proceeded after it fell significantly to our part of earth (March 2020–June 2020). We posit this new disrupted timescale as ‘BC’, before-COVID, and ‘AC’, after-COVID. And this is how the final book is framed, in two COVID parts, BC and AC (noting that AC refers to after the virus *arrived* not after it *departed,* for at the time of writing these words, still under protective lockdown, the virus remains very much on the global stage).

There is some humour and discovery in this imposed reframing. Under the State of Victoria’s lockdown regulations, it was impossible to undertake the type of wide-eyed meandering that urban tramping demanded of us. Suddenly, as with many other global jurisdictions, only ‘exercise’ with healthful (and not, as in our case, stealthful) purpose was permitted. We complied while gently demurring with these proscriptions. A set of tramping journeys occurred after the lockdown, always with exercise as the main obvious object, and of course the tramps separated by ‘safe distance’. But always with a careful eye maintained for the tramp’s purpose, to find wrinkles in the self-confident fabric of neoliberal urbanism. Some virtual work was combined with real purposeful exercise as described. In short, we found our way to experience the COVID city and continue the project of seeking *Urban Awakenings*.

We know that you are reading this book with the realisation and wisdom of the many months that have followed the end of our (recorded) tramping. Much will have happened in this epic species drama since we put down our pens—even as we write the Black Lives Matter protests are erupting globally in glorious rage, suggesting that the human story is undergoing further twists and transformations, unsettling the future. Such are the timescales of publication, thankfully not much disrupted in this case by the pandemic. We have two things to say about this. First, we stand to the BC assessments we undertook of Melbourne,

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our industrial city, that were made before the crisis because they were made in a city that still exists, if transformed in yet unfolding ways by the pandemic. This is the part of our scholarship that speaks to the general historical experience of neoliberalism and its urban expression in recent decades. We always wanted to interrogate the longer testimony of this city as much as its contemporary moment. Second, the COVID disruption chimes eerily in a sense with the larger thesis we carried in our journeys, that of a social order in denial about its contradictions and vulnerabilities. This realisation mid-project, and as the pandemic unfolded, added a new dimensionality to our work which we hope is captured in the AC writings.

History is always a continuously disturbed, not simply providential, process. *Urban Awakenings* testifies to that fact. In its writing, we were unexpectedly disrupted in a project that fixed on the question of disruption as a feature of the modern urban predicament. In that way the historic pandemic moment reaffirmed our undertaking. Through all this we think we have learned more deeply about the vulnerabilities of capitalist modernity than we first imagined; we see more clearly the bubbles under its throne. We offer, dear reader, a fractured book that speaks in its final form to the very question we set out with—namely, is capitalism the invulnerable, natural social form that it asserts to be? In 2020, a rogue visceral ecology, COVID-19, not an enemy empire, brought the entire system to its knees.

We consider the question answered.

Notes

1. Jane Bennett, 2001. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
2. Tramping is a term used in Australia and New Zealand meaning ‘bushwalking’, a practice and disposition we will be applying to and in the city.
3. Bennett, *Enchantment*, p 3.
4. Ibid., p 4.
5. See Samuel Alexander, 2017. *Art Against Empire: Toward an Aesthetics of Degrowth*. Melbourne: Simplicity Institute.
6. Bennett, *Enchantment*, p 3.
7. John Holloway, 2010 (2nd edn). *Change the World Without Taking Power*. London: Pluto Press, p 1.
8. Bennett, *Enchantment*, p 3.
9. David Harvey, 2006. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
10. See, e.g., Walter Benjamin, 1997. *Charles Baudelaire*. London: Verso; Edmund White, 2015. *The Flâneur: A Stroll Through the Paradoxes of Paris*. London: Bloomsbury; and Lauren Elkin, 2017. *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London*. London: Vintage.
11. Stephen Graham, 2019 [1926]. *The Gentle Art of Tramping*. London: Bloomsbury.

Part I

Sleepers, Wake!

2

Unsettling the Story of Disenchantment

> Rising, tram, four hours in the office or factory, meal, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, according to the same rhythm – this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement. 'Begins' – this is important.[1]
>
> —Albert Camus

Urban life in industrial civilisation has the tendency to disenchant everyday experience. Too often, in the daily grind, one is left feeling disconnected from people, place, and purpose. We have all felt this disconnection and perhaps feel it even now—we humans of late capitalism. As if somehow aware we are fiddling while Rome (or the Arctic) burns, we might ask ourselves incredulously: What are we doing? And why? There are no clear answers to these semi-conscious disturbances. It is too easy to move through the ruts of city life with little poetry or purpose.

You can see this malaise in the slowly dying eyes of people commuting to soul-numbing jobs, those seemingly lifeless actors regurgitating the

S. Alexander and B. Gleeson, *Urban Awakenings*,
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pre-written script of advanced industrial society; cogs in a vast machine, easily replaced. If one is brave enough to maintain eye contact, perhaps we see our own urban disenchantment reflected in the eyes of those tired, alienated commuters, a class into which it is so easy to fall simply by virtue of being subjects of the capitalist order. Where are we going? And why? Unfreedom persists and prevails, gazing at mobile phones, yet something in the human spirit refuses to accept that this is all there is—a vital obstinacy that helps keep despair at bay and the flicker of hope alive. The hour may be dark but on the horizon a shadow stirs. Still, the uncertain promise of some glorious new dawn is not needed to justify a rejection of a world immiserated by capital's overreach. We all know that there is more to life than *this*.

Courtesy of Lena Singla © (http://lenasingla.com/).

Unhinged from our dreams of what we hoped the world would be like, urban life today threatens us all quietly with a vague dread, a foreboding realisation that somehow the mistakes of times past have acquired inertia that is locking us into an uncomfortable existence not of our choosing.

We are struggling to constitute the urban future, for it seems we are constituted by the urban past. As the Anthropocene lifts its veil and we allow ourselves to digest the full extent of the social and ecological catastrophes unfolding, it becomes clear the human inhabitation of Earth is 'developing' into a story of dubious honour. Progress has begun to turn back on itself, as the promises of capital, growth, and technology fail us, despite the material benefits offered to some.

We see this with our eyes and feel it in our hearts. Most troubling of all, perhaps, we are easily left uncertain of life's meaning and direction, inducing that strange existential ache of ennui in the depths of our nature. It is a disturbing spiritual condition—an urban condition—too complex to be fully captured with words. Indeed, perhaps we would not want it fully captured with words, even if human language had the capacity. To borrow a phrase from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein: 'What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence'.[2]

And why should it be a surprise that urban life is so often disenchanting? Trees and birds are disappearing from our lives as concrete and tarseal continue their inexorable creep, exiling non-human life. We urbanites are sometimes permitted what Australians call a 'nature strip'—a small area of grass near the roadside, enclosed by concrete and beneath powerlines, upon which we can place our plastic trash trolleys each week. Our primordial essence suffocates as we lose connection with the seasons and cycles of nature, living indoors under artificial lights or in the shadow of billboards. Weeds in the pavement are doused in RoundUp in the hope of maintaining the grim tidiness of civilised life. Where is our rage for nature?

In many western cities, clone-like suburbs continue their spread into farmlands and forests. They are matched by the clone-like residential towers spreading inexorably outwards and upwards from congested inner cities. The Global South seems set to follow, voluntarily or not. In Australia, as elsewhere, urban densification has been promoted by planners and delivered by developers in quest for the 'green compact city'. It is an ideal that has been concretised, literally, by a freewheeling development industry that has produced a vast and poorly built landscape that can only be called 'vertical sprawl'. We fear this ideal to be but capitalism's latest deception, a new licence for pillage of green amenity and life space. Perhaps the compact city project is the system's final material act of violence? It is too early to tell.

When and where did things go wrong? In the midst of over-crowded cities, there is more isolation than ever, despite living on top of each other as never before. In the UK, there is now a Minister for Loneliness. If only this were some fictionalised, dystopian satire, but no, it is all too real. The pandemic has enforced through law what had earlier merely been a social fact of separation. Impatiently the cars and trucks hurry past as if they had a place to be, leaving only the smell and noise of oil's combustion in their wake. City life goes on with such fierce determination, slowed but not stopped by the coronavirus. We are easily caught up in the current, with barely enough time to breathe in the fumes or microbes. The newspapers tell of how last night there was another murder, still we casually flick through to the next article and read about sport, finance, or celebrity gossip, uncomfortably numb, anything to avoid the sinkhole of further reporting about COVID-19. If only we could see our twisted faces. If only we took time to cradle the human heart.

Still, as Albert Camus declared, one day the 'why' arises—and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement. 'Begins', he says '– this is important.' Weariness, Camus suggested, 'comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness. It awakens consciousness and provokes what follows. What follows is the gradual return into the chain or it is the definitive awakening'.[3] So which will it be? A gradual return into the chain? Or a definitive urban awakening? Surely it is up to us.

This book begins at that moment of weariness tinged with amazement. It begins when one realises that our urban vitality—our verve for city life—has begun to fade, weighed down by diverse burdens, and yet, at the same time, in a moment of madness, we capture a glimpse in almost childlike wonder of the city's prospect and lost spectacle; of what Hannah Arendt called our 'natality'—a sense that the world as it is, is not how the world has to be. New worlds—new cities—are seen partially formed between the sentences of the old story, waiting to be born. Will we live them into existence? Or will we stick our heads in the sand as the tide moves in? To resign oneself to disenchantment is to accept the latter—an orientation we set out to discredit.

Courtesy of Jessica Laine Morris ©
(http://jessicalainemorris.wixsite.com/artist).

An Urban Politics of Enchantment?

The premise of this book is that urban disenchantment poses an ethical and political problem. Transformative action is not set in motion merely by an intellectual appreciation of crisis, immiseration, and exploitation. One can know of these horrors and yet not act… out of disenchantment. For disenchantment's primary consequence is passive resignation to the status quo, which is capitalism's greatest achievement and its greatest tragedy. To act, to resist, to rebel, to revolt—these necessary orientations and interventions, we argue, depend on a state or mood of enchantment, the absence of which is haunting urban politics today.

Courtesy of Tomoki Hayasaka © (http://www.sheerheart.jp/).

At once, of course, the notion of 'enchantment' needs further explanation, especially in its application to the industrial city, which is arguably modernity's defining achievement. Max Weber argued that modernity was increasingly disenchanted and stamped with 'the imprint of meaninglessness'.[4] Even today the prevailing view is that the industrial city—with its cars, concrete, over-crowdedness, pollution, and noise—cannot be experienced as enchanted. Indeed, in our post-Enlightenment age, any appeal to this notion requires not just definition but justification, since it normally belongs to past ages of superstition. In this book, we seek to challenge those prevailing views, drawing on and extending the seminal work of philosopher Jane Bennett in her text, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*.[5] Inspired by Bennett's work, we will endeavour to rehabilitate the notion of enchantment and apply it to the urban context. We seek enchantment because we seek disturbance—in ways of which this book will tell. While we are the first to admit that there are plenty of aspects of contemporary life that fit the disenchantment story, we wish to test Bennett's thesis that 'there is enough evidence of everyday enchantment to warrant the telling of an alter-tale'.[6]

Let us be clear, this is no invocation to return to the oppressive superstition, stultifying tradition, and material grubbing of pre-modernity. Our values are thoroughly modern—even if we enquire, with Bruno Latour, as to whether humanity has ever been truly modern. We subscribe, that is, to the centrality of reason for human (and indeed non-human) prospect. We were reminded, however, by the late Ulrich Beck that *doubt*—the necessary restraining twin of *reason*—is also a primordial Enlightenment value. Things went very wrong in industrial modernity when doubt was cast aside in favour of the rule of excessive reason. The horrors of authoritarian and corporatist rule (Left and Right) come to mind.

This is where the notion of enchantment comes in. Our use of the word denotes not magic but the very things we might associate with healthy doubt in an industrial order; a sensitivity to ambivalence, the unresolved, the overflowing and uncontained, the surprising and unplanned for. We are open to seeing and feeling things that the cold logic of instrumental rationality might marginalise or obscure. We seek to find the rust in the machine, which may take lovely colours and remind us of the mortality of all things, of the limits to growth imposed by death and decay. Mightn't we be enchanted *with good reason* when green shoots are seen pushing through the soil as the machine of capitalism itself is composted (and composts itself)?

None of these glimpses and provocations should frighten us, as much as they might jolt or disturb us, because they work to restrain rationality and prevent the overreach reflected in assertions like limitless economic growth, unbounded abundance, and geoengineering. To look at the city anew, through the questioning lens of enchantment, is to do what therapists implore us to do through meditation: *to fall awake*.

Courtesy of Maria Peña © (http://www.maria-pena.com/).

Urban enchantment is a kind of mindfulness that is committed to awakening from the technocratic dreams and arrogations of growth fetishism and industrialism. Indeed, perhaps urbanites in the overdeveloped world may need to fall, descend, and 'degrow' from such heights in order to wake up—a complex meditation to which we will return.[7]

At base, we employ the term enchantment to signify an affective state—a mood of enchantment. We defend the idea that this mood is a necessary precondition to ethical practice and political engagement, in that it can create the emotional capacity for wonder, compassion, engagement, and generosity. As Bennett explains, to be enchanted 'is to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar