

WINTER 2008 WINNER *Eric Slessarev*

INSTRUCTOR'S FOREWORD

IN "NATURE TAKES MANHATTAN: A SECRET REBELLION," Eric takes us for a walk on the wild side, lifting the veil on a New York whose mighty skyscrapers muffle and obscure, but fail to extinguish, the secret life that flourishes in burrows, nests, and other hidden fastnesses of the city. Invoking a fundamental opposition between the manufactured city and wild, untrammelled nature, Eric proposes that certain gestures on the part of the city dweller—both actions and acts of the imagination—constitute a "quiet protest" against the sterility of the industrial landscape. Whether by pausing to admire a fern growing in the cracks of a viaduct, cheering for a pair of red-tailed hawks nesting atop a Fifth Avenue apartment building, or chronicling (in a MTV film, no less) the antics of an army of singing cockroaches who resist eviction from an East Village apartment, city folks, Eric posits, enact an environmental rebellion every time they acknowledge and affirm wild nature.

In the research proposal that laid the groundwork for this paper, Eric sketched out an essay that would encompass a world—and then some—ranging geographically from Manahattan with its red-tailed hawks and rats; to Telegraph Hill in San Francisco, home to the eponymous parrots; to urban Soweto, South Africa, where cows are kept in the streets; on to India, whose "urban monkey problem" Eric references; and then concluding in Chernobyl, where nature has, surprisingly, returned. The exceptional scope of this paper, as outlined in the proposal, expressed itself as well in a wide-ranging literary-philosophical inquiry that draws on the insights of Jack London, Umberto Eco, Thomas Carlyle, Charles Dickens, T.S. Eliot, among others, along with Joseph Berger ("The Water's Fine, but is it Kosher?"). "I like to mix-up disciplines," Eric confided to me on a preliminary information sheet.

That Eric will one day succeed in writing his magnum-opus, one of whose appeals will be its multi-disciplinary flavor, seems likely to me. The very fact that he was able to conjure up such a universe of references in his proposal attests to his research skills, erudition, and ambitions for his work. And the comprehensiveness suggested in the proposal clearly makes itself felt in his essay. One of Eric's main challenges in writing this essay was to find a way to streamline and package his research, and to frame and organize his argument. His decision to use the wilds of metropolitan New York as a case study for illustrating a dynamic that, arguably, repeats itself in multiple vari-

ations worldwide has proved to be a happy and productive one.

The second major challenge Eric faced in developing this paper related to issues of style and tone. In its first iteration, the essay had what struck me as an “oracular” quality, a term Eric and I came to smile about. The guiding intelligence in the essay seemed to be that of a remote sage handing down pronouncements from on high, at a great distance. The language came across as opaque in places, and after reviewing a few pages of the draft, class members reported to Eric that the essay was at times taxing to read. Eric’s responsiveness to this constructive criticism and the resourcefulness with which he went to work on revising his prose, concentrating on achieving a more accessible style, was exemplary. The final essay exhibits his sure command of voice and never sacrifices the keen sense of humor that invites us to contemplate alligators in the sewers. While “Nature Takes Manhattan” may not be oracular, with its deft elaboration of the tension between the modern city and the wilds, it is visionary.

—WENDY GOLDBERG

Nature Takes New York: A Secret Rebellion

Eric Slessarev

“We had no goal beyond the Park Avenue viaduct, which, with its crevices and crumbling mortar, is a perfect place to see chink-finding, xerophytic ferns ...” (Sacks).

IN HIS 2007 *New Yorker* article “Botanists on Park,” acclaimed popular science writer Oliver Sacks tells the story of the wild ferns that grow between the stones of the Park Avenue viaduct. The article briefly sketches the exploits of a pack of fern enthusiasts who decide to follow a busy Manhattan thoroughfare in search of urban plant-life. What place do these insurgent plants occupy in the structure of a fabled metropolis? What is it about the wild ferns of Park Avenue that inspires amateur botany and captures Sacks’s literary imagination?

It is probably fair to assume that most modern cities are distinctly manufactured: leveled, excavated, paved, and landscaped to serve the people that inhabit them. Humans build cities for various reasons and employ all degrees and types of planning and architectural styles, but the theme of *manufactured structure* is in all likelihood inherent to all cities, particularly large, industrially constructed metropolises such as New York. In this sense cities exist in opposition to that which is wild: the untamed plants, animals, and fungi that gnaw, undermine, contaminate, and erode man-made structures. If one accepts that the city and the wild are opposed, then the spectacle of Sacks and the fern enthusiasts takes on a subversive meaning: in a certain sense, those who value nature in the midst of a modern city perform a quiet protest by enshrining wild invaders, implicitly questioning the environmentally destructive forces of industry and urbanism. In other words, one might argue that to marvel at a fern growing among skyscrapers is—perhaps unwittingly—to challenge the value of the skyscrapers, to acknowledge the mortality

of stone and mortar, and to rebel against the orthodox urban aesthetic.

In what follows, we will investigate how city-dwellers who value or enshrine wild elements engage in an oblique protest against the manufactured structure that surrounds them. Some of the evidence for this secret protest lies in natural and social history, but the most meaningful examples come from folklore, art, and literature, and thus culture will form the centerpiece of our inquiry. New York City, the quintessential “concrete jungle,” provides an excellent case study because its especially rich and varied cultural history abounds with stories and creations that reflect the passive rebelliousness of nature-loving urbanites. Although conclusive proof of such subversion may be unreachable, this investigation aims at least to open the door for further analysis by describing New York City from the perspective of the bird-watchers, rat-watchers, botanists, and ecologists—environmental rebels, all—who walk its streets.

A BRIEF SKETCH OF MANUFACTURED STRUCTURE IN NEW YORK CITY

What exactly defines the “urban aesthetic” that nature-loving city dwellers seem to be subverting? To describe the city as a place of technology, industry, and manufactured structure assumes that cities can be readily defined. Journalist and self-styled urban design critic Mike Greenberg questions the idea that cities have any single, stable definition in his book *The Poetics of Cities*:

A city is a palimpsest, a document with many layers of accretion and imperfect erasure, many glosses and commentaries and marginal notes. No city was summoned into being in an instant, by the will of a single creator. Any city reveals the traces of its development over time and space (57).

Greenberg asserts that no city can be defined in a phrase—cities are polyphonic, the product of many cultures and many histories. This seems reasonable in the context of New York, a particularly dynamic metropolis. The online city guide, NY.com, describes a varied landscape housing over seven million people from all across the globe. The guide sums up the enormity of the city with a quotation from H.G. Wells, “to tell the story of New York would be to write a social history of the world.” In light of the overwhelming complexity of New York, perhaps it is presumptuous to claim that the city is fundamentally opposed to wildness.

However, the well-known material aspects of New York City show that it is a good example of urban manufactured structure, and that its existence

inherently opposes wildness. Emporis.com, an international database of building statistics, catalogues 13,026 individual buildings within the city limits, 5,014 of which are high rises—the sheer surface area covered by these buildings, in addition to all of the paved space, means that much of the city area is impervious to ordinary ecological colonization. There is, of course, plenty of extraordinary ecological colonization going on, as the city faces a constant onslaught of plants and animals that establish themselves in the cracks and niches of the paved landscape, and within tamed parks and gardens (Weisman 26). The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation reports that the volume of pesticides used commercially in New York City in 2005 was 116,762 gallons, which is as much as one sixth of the amount used in all agriculture statewide that year—evidence of an active battle against wild invaders (“Final 2005 Report”). Even the earth the city is built on requires constant, industrial-scale maintenance in order to support streets and skyscrapers. Environmental journalist Alan Weisman investigates the effort of keeping New York from succumbing to the elements in his bestselling work *The World Without Us*, where he uncovers the startling fact that 13-million gallons of local groundwater are pumped from the city’s subway tunnels every day to prevent collapse (24). Clearly the struggle against natural forces is essential to the survival of New York. In this light the actions of urban naturalists seem particularly rebellious, for the plants and animals they revere assault the city by degree with every root, burrow, and nest.

But what about planted trees, gardens, and public parks? One might object to the claim that New York is opposed to wildness by pointing out that the city was not designed as a sterile wasteland—room was made for green public spaces that are in no conflict with the integrity of the city, and are in fact integral to its structure. However, planned parks and gardens do not constitute wild elements because almost invariably they are constructed and maintained by humans, tamed and controlled (although some parks go wild and provide an interesting exception, discussed below in the section “Wild Spaces”). Central Park is a good example of a park built to the ideal of manufactured structure. Urban bird-watcher and nature-writer Marie Winn makes the point that no matter how wild Central Park has now become, its original designer, Fredrick Law Olmstead, and his collaborators never “intended any part of it to be a real wilderness” (Winn 21). Olmstead’s journals confirm that Central Park was deliberately manufactured, requiring the draining of marshes, the blasting of “undignified” rocks, and the removal of “primeval forest” so that the land might “resemble a charming bit of rural landscape” (Olmstead 212–13). Even if sections of the Park have since revert-

ed to a less ordered state, it is significant that the very spirit of the Park's design excludes wild elements. Apparently resistance to untamed nature is intrinsic in the design of the city, even in parks.

Because New York City physically opposes the wild, its inhabitants sometimes resist nature through stories, norms, and practices that reflect the ideals of manufactured structure. Some anecdotes about New York's plumbing system provide good examples of cultural hostility toward wildness. One of the nation's most famous urban legends, the tale of the alligators that inhabit sewers, comes from a 1935 *New York Times* article that tells of an eight-foot-long alligator emerging from a manhole on East 123rd Street ("Alligator"). Urban folklorist Mark Barber notes, however, the biological impossibility of large reptiles persisting in city sewers and explains the story in terms of "the deep fascination and fear of what may be lurking underneath our cities" (113). More recently, in 2004, there was an outburst of public hysteria when the presence of microscopic copepods in city water was publicized, even though the harmless crustaceans had been in the water for years. The orthodox Jewish community spearheaded the protest on the grounds that the shelled plankton were not kosher, and there was a general surge in water filter purchases across religious persuasions (Berger). Both these stories are rather whimsical, but it is reasonable to assume that most New Yorkers expect sewers and tap water—plus streets, alleys, gutters, and rooftops—to be more or less animal free. Urbanites who defy this cultural norm by inviting some degree of unplanned natural colonization are also challenging the industrial sterility and manufactured structure of the urban landscape.

BIRD-WATCHERS

Oliver Sacks and his fern fanatics disrupt the normal rhythms of Park Avenue just by looking at wild plants. The urban botanists cause a traffic jam as drivers gawk, passersby take photos, and police officers gaze with "suspicion" and "bewilderment" (Sacks). Simply stopping to observe wild elements is enough to disrupt the fast-moving patterns of urban existence. Although fern-watching may be an uncommon pastime, the deceptively passive action of observation is shared by all urban naturalists. New York City bird-watchers provide a good case study.

New York City lies on a major bird migration flyway that extends along the eastern coast of North America. Although much of the city is hostile to migrating birds, parks, marshland, and skyscraper ledges provide habitat for many species that persist in the urban environment (Rothschadl). The

Audubon Society of New York City manages bird populations in the city and provides resources for public bird-watchers. One might expect that the Audubon chapter for such an urbanized area would be anemic, but this is far from the case: the organization's 2007 report shows that patrons donated over \$422,000 to the society over that year, with funds going to nature tours and education for over 3000 New Yorkers ("Annual Report 2007"). Audubon works to monitor the ecology of the city by extending bird censuses to urban parks and monitoring nesting heron colonies on waterways. The organization even made a successful push to dim New York's signature skyline during migratory months by having several large skyscrapers leave lights off overnight to reduce fatal collisions by passing birds. Nesting birds benefit from intense micromanagement—Audubon directed the cleaning and repair of a single hawk nest on the 12th story cornice of a building on 5th Avenue (New York City Audubon). Clearly many New Yorkers care a great deal about local birdlife and are ready to support intensive conservation projects.

By devoting money and energy to the painstaking preservation of relict bird populations, urban birders draw attention to the environmental hostility of their industrial living space. Audubon conducts its Christmas bird count every year and reports on the successes and losses of carefully tended heron colonies and raptor nests in the five boroughs (New York City Audubon). Inevitably, the bird count inspires the question: How many birds would there be if the city was never built? In other words, acknowledging the fragility of urban bird populations implies an environmental criticism of the city. Furthermore, New York City Audubon's mission statement suggests that the organization's basic ideals conflict with urbanism and manufactured structure. The statement posits an unorthodox, environmentalist vision in which ordered, man-made structures are peripheral, and New York City is described in terms of its "12,000 acres of vast and diverse wetlands, forests and grasslands" with no mention of skyscrapers and busy streets (New York City Audubon).

It is scarcely surprising that a large environmental organization like Audubon is philosophically opposed to industrial urbanization and seeks to redefine the environment of the city. Much more striking is the grass-roots environmental culture shared by everyday city bird-watchers. The story at the center of Marie Winn's book *Red Tails in Love* gives a good indication of the vitality and popularity of urban bird-watching and environmentalism. In this *New York Times* "notable book of the year," Winn tells the story of Central Park birders who maintain a voluminous, tome-like bird guide in the park boathouse, and chronicles the lives of a famous breeding pair of red-tailed hawks, Pale Male and First Love (7–20). Scattered through Winn's medita-

tive text are environmental criticisms leveled at the sterile structure of the city, such as when she questions the use of poison for rodent control, or decries the effects of urban noise pollution on migratory birds (103, 226). Winn's book paved the way for a popular PBS documentary on the red tails, *Pale Male*, and a large public following coalesced around the hawks. In 2004, the city attempted to clear Pale Male's roost out of concern for the cleanliness of the surroundings, and almost immediately faced a massive public outcry (Rothschadl). The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reports that Audubon moved in to negotiate between the city and outraged citizens, promoting the installation of a special debris guard to keep nest material and pigeon remains off the streets. In a 2005 press release, the Wildlife Service, Audubon, and the City Parks and Recreation Department announced the joint creation of a \$100,000 "raptor fund" for the preservation of the city's multiple hawk and falcon nests. The creators of the fund pointedly "applaud the tenacity of New Yorkers" who rallied for conservation ("Coalition").

The struggle to protect New York City's raptors certainly fits the model of public protest. Bird-watchers—seemingly innocuous, passive observers of nature—jumped to the defense when the city threatened to eradicate disorderly raptor nests. The citizens were so charged that Audubon, a heavyweight environmental organization in its own right, had to intervene to moderate between outraged New Yorkers and the city. The action of bird-watching takes on a different meaning in light of the Pale Male story. Those who watch are far from passive; they are standing guard over wild elements, waiting to protest loudly when the city tries to clean those elements out. There are several live-feed internet cameras installed in the city, including one "hawkcam" in Queens run by Audubon and an independent "falconcam" on 55 Water Street ("55water"). New Yorker birders can check on the condition of their cherished birds at any time of day from any part of the world. Through constant vigilance, devoted birders protect urban raptors from the scouring arm of urban hygiene and the threat of manufactured structure—city maintenance cannot disturb a nest without public knowledge and swift resistance. In this way the gaze of the urban bird-watcher becomes a force of grass-roots environmental resistance.

VERMIN

Birds of prey are majestic, endangered, and charismatic—an easy rallying point for environmentalists. Public defense of urban raptors could be the product of a superficial, romanticized love of nature that poses no real threat

to the foundations of industrial urbanism. The attitudes of New Yorkers toward vermin are far more complex. Sometimes city dwellers choose to value pest animals that are normally considered ugly and offensive. Can the culture of the rat and the roach embody an environmental protest?

Rodents and cockroaches are ubiquitous in New York City, where they are almost universally treated as pests and exterminated whenever possible. The City Department of Health provides online guides to rodent and cockroach control that speak to the prevalence of the pests and the importance of control efforts (“Pest Control,” “Cockroach”). A December 2005 Health Department document states that 25% of city households report rodent infestations and 30% report cockroach infestations, with concentrations highest in northern Manhattan, southern and central Bronx, and central Brooklyn—low-income neighborhoods (“Pests”). Furthermore, a 1997 seven-city study on asthma in low-income households found that “asthmatic children exposed to cockroach infestation in their houses or apartments have more frequent and more severe asthma attacks” (Romano). On the matter of rodents, the City Health Department puts matters bluntly: “nobody should have to live with rats” (“Pest Control”). It seems reasonable to actively exterminate rodents and roaches wherever they are present—public hygiene and social equity demand as much.

Even so, a brief study of urban culture reveals that some individuals are ready to side with the pests. Even if vermin are justifiably reviled, it is significant that New Yorkers often delight in celebrating and imagining the lives of urban vermin in literature. In some stories vermin are appreciated and partly redeemed, although this often means they are tamed and manicured, or made cute for public consumption. Consider the case of E.B. White’s classic children’s novel, *Stuart Little* (1945) Stuart the mouse is a totally anthropomorphized rodent who navigates the iconic landscape of Manhattan as an integrated member of society. Significantly, the great, frightening abyss of Stuart’s world is a mouse-hole, a threatening reminder of the feral nature that Stuart has overcome in becoming civilized (White 11). White accepts the presence of mice in the city on the provision that they cease to become mice, and in this sense he remains close to the anti-vermin status quo. A second children’s text, George Seldon’s *The Cricket in Times Square* (1945), presents a more unorthodox vision of vermin in the city. Seldon’s characters—a mouse, a cat, and a cricket—are more like real animals, scavenging for food among the drainpipes and packing boxes of Times Square. They coexist pleasantly with humans, but remain animals in an urban street environment (Seldon 1–10). Published fifteen years after *Stuart Little*, Seldon’s book is slightly more daring; instead of taming the urban rodent, he redeems the

mouse as a mouse. A young New Yorker reading Seldon's text might develop a more tolerant, sympathetic attitude toward domestic vermin that are usually trapped or poisoned without a second thought. The effect is rather innocuous, but still obliquely subversive: a subtle change of perspective in the mouse's favor.

Not all apologies for vermin are as charming as Seldon's mouse story. More recent cultural creations make a loud call for the appreciation of less attractive animals. In a 1997 nature guide, *Wild New York*, authors Mittelbach and Crewdson offer a short natural history entitled "Rat Nation," which makes an important statement simply by including rats amongst more charismatic fauna (76–79). More extreme than *Wild New York* is Robert Sullivan's 2004 bestselling work of nonfiction, *Rats*. Sullivan sets the stage for his underground natural history by describing New York as a place of mechanical repetition, relating that he lives in "an apartment building on a block filled with other apartment buildings" (1). Sullivan's retreat from the overwhelming sameness is a "filth-slicked little alley" where he sits "rain or no rain, night after night, and always at night" to watch rats (2). The act of rat-watching is an explicitly rebellious gesture, a challenge to anthropocentrism: Sullivan states that "it is the very ostracism of the rat, its exclusion from the pantheon of natural wonders, that makes it appealing to me" (2). The rest of Sullivan's text is part natural history, part travelogue as he tours around in search of wild urban rats. The end of the book includes an odd parallel with the Pale Male hawk saga when Sullivan's alley is cleared out by city exterminators. Unfortunately, Sullivan is a lone rat dissident, and his attempts to protect the burrows of his filth-slicked alley prove fruitless (213–19). The lovers of vermin evidently comprise a subculture of one.

Even so, in some circumstances vermin successfully capture the imagination of popular culture in full, untamed style. The cockroach—perhaps even less outwardly charming than the rat—wins admiration as a source of comic inspiration. Don Marquis's "archy and mehitabel" (sic) 1920's comic strip from the New York *Sun Dial* features poems tapped out by a cockroach who writes in the style of e.e. cummings because he cannot manipulate the "shift" key. One poem from 1927 reads, "insects are not always/ going to be bullied/ by humanity/ some day they will revolt/ i am already organizing/ a revolutionary society." The humor of this stanza comes from the quixotic spunk of archy's challenge. The audacity of the roach-poet conveys an ironic truth; although roaches are small insects, they are ubiquitous and indestructible, perpetually evading bigger, more intelligent human hosts.

A more recent example of roach-related irony is the film *Joe's Apartment* (1996), an MTV production that tells the story of a building in the East

Village controlled by omnipotent, singing, dancing roaches. The appeal of the film comes from a role reversal; the roaches are not exterminated, but rather the apartment's mafia landlords are thwarted when the insect horde fights back with the threat, "we know where you live. *We live* where you live." When the film's college-age protagonist, Joe, claims the apartment for himself, the roaches tie him down like a modern-day Gulliver with the declaration, "*We* were here first. We'll be here last too. We've got a longtime lease on this planet. Roaches will be crawling over the daisy popping out of the last, rotting human corpse." Much as Don Marquis did seventy years earlier, John Payson, the film's writer and director, evidently sees the potential for heroism in the life of the common cockroach. By highlighting the survival powers of the roach, Payson humiliates his human characters by reminding them of their mortality and subverting their anthropocentric self-assuredness. In Payson's film the cockroach is transformed into a symbol representing a critique of human dominance.

Perhaps the most extreme form of this critique goes so far as to *equate* humans with insects. Tyler Knox's bizarre and disturbing novel, *Kockroach* (2007), tells the story of a Times Square motel cockroach who becomes a man, reversing the metamorphosis that occurs in Franz Kafka's classic tale. The novel's eponymous protagonist is a classic anti-hero who rises through society to the rank of senator through amoral swindling and violence. Knox depicts the roach world as an alternate civilization built on alien values, such that his hero initially finds his human face "horrifyingly ugly, with none of the sharp elegance of the cockroach face" (8). However, while *Kockroach's* sensibilities are alien, his cynical, survivalist attitudes also lead him to success. Perhaps Knox is suggesting that the differences between vermin and humans are only skin deep, and that human virtues are also fundamentally vermin-like qualities.

Knox's work suggests a common thread uniting New York's vermin stories: literature can bring pests closer to people. E.B. White and George Seldon make mice lovable; Robert Sullivan lives among rats; Joe teams up with the roaches under his sink; and *Kockroach* strides out into human society. In each of these cases humans and animals are brought into comparison, although each artist clearly has his own perspective on the relationship. Thus it seems possible that when humans become more culturally intimate with vermin, they may become more tolerant of the pests that physically surround them. In other words, the "vermin story" is like a peace protest against the war between pests and people. In this light, this story has great potential as an environmental critique because it forces city dwellers to re-evaluate even the most unpleasant aspects of their highly structured relationship to nature.

WILD SPACES

“If there’s some we hold in common it’s the love we hold for earth
We reclaim the vacant lots and grow tomatoes and the herbs!”

The More Gardens! Coalition sang these words to the tune of “John Brown’s Body” before a New York City courthouse in 1999 (Von Hassel 1). The coalition was protesting the reclamation and development of community garden spaces under the orders of Mayor Rudolf Giuliani. In a costumed “Rites of Spring Parade,” protestors marched through the streets dressed as giant flowers and vegetables (Staeheli 98). Community gardens are not wild spaces, but the example of the More Gardens! protest provokes an interesting question about wild spaces in New York. If people are willing to rally around gardens, then might they also sometimes value uncultivated, undeveloped islands in the ocean of urban structure? It seems that intact, undeveloped wild spaces might be hard to defend in a city with high real estate demand and a history of literally paving over the forests and marshes of its pre-urban environment. In some respects the untamed landscape is the most radical icon of protest against the urban aesthetic of manufactured structure.

In a city where land is a commodity, some individuals and organizations persist in celebrating relict pre-urban ecology. An environmental historian of New York City, Matthew Gandy, describes the “sharp polarization of perspectives on public space” that emerged in the 1990s in response to increased gentrification pressures (104). He writes that “Central Park is now the tranquil core of an increasingly globalized dynamic of land commodification,” and indicates that the City’s many other parks are shrinking while Olmstead’s creation persists only because it is iconic (105). This means that New York is poised to lose many marginally wild spaces—parks that are partly reverted to an untamed state. Some parks, like Chelsea’s High Line, came into being through uncontrolled ecological colonization, literally reclaimed from vacant lots by wild flowers and grasses (Weisman 27). Brooklyn’s Prospect Park, with its particularly tangled lakeshore, is a good example of a park space that has been partly recovered by wild colonists. City authorities recognized the importance of Prospect’s untamed elements, and rather than “weeding” the lakeshore, teams of ecologists assessed the space for massive restoration in order to improve “the relationships between water quality, vegetation, and wildlife” (Caldwell 4). It is significant that New Yorkers valued a patch of tangled park enough to protect it from the space demands of gentrification, treating it as an authentic wilderness.

Arguably, New York City’s ultimate environmental subversives are those who celebrate extinct pre-urban ecology, imagining the city returned to its

primeval wild space or even re-conquered by the wild. The Mannahatta Project, run through the Wildlife Conservation Society, is a research program that proposes “to understand, down to the level of one city block, where in Manhattan streams once flowed or where American chestnuts may have grown, where black bears once marked territories, and where the Lenape fished and hunted” (“Mannahatta”). The Mannahatta Project is only an educational program, but the image of the island restored is a powerful environmental symbol that carries a subtext of destruction. Alan Weisman draws from the findings of the Mannahatta Project in *The World Without Us*, where he sketches a hypothetical future in which the city, abandoned, decays back to a wild state. Weisman’s haunting, apocalyptic descriptions of weeds bursting through asphalt and rain-gutted skyscrapers are more awe-inspiring than frightening. The image of the city reclaimed is as beautiful as it is tragic, and it recurs as a compelling visual across media. *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), a film about climate apocalypse, contains striking shots of New York partly submerged under a pristine layer of glacial ice. In 2007, the high-grossing film *I Am Legend* practically advertised Weisman’s book with both scenes of New York turned partly to grassland after three years of neglect and compelling images of escaped zoo-lions chasing deer through the city streets. Weisman’s book and the two films carry a powerful, humbling message. New York City, a great achievement of human engineering and industry, is mortal, subject to the unrelenting forces of nature. Such predictions of urban apocalypse re-frame the city as an insignificant, temporary folly on the geological timescale. The specter of the apocalypse confronts the hubris behind manufactured structure and asserts the ultimate dominance of wild spaces.

At some level, the analysis here has been necessarily sketchy, and the examples admittedly eclectic. Clearly the environmental rebels of New York City comprise a nebulous and varied group, often with little relation to each other. However, in the midst of this cacophony of examples several themes resound clearly, outlining an environmental critique that is unique to the city. First, in a large city, those who watch wildlife are not passive, for they implicitly protest with their gaze. Second, the pest-infested environment of the city forces some urbanites to appreciate the least charismatic animals. Third, when the grandeur of the city is juxtaposed with the memory and persistence of wild spaces, people sometimes imagine a radical future that frames the very mortality of industrial civilization. These three perspectives are valuable additions in the arsenal of environmentalist thought, and it seems probable that only a city could produce such critiques. In places like New York City, nature and manufactured structure collide to generate conflict and nurture activity and creativity. A typical rural activist might never develop the obsession to

defend one hawk's nest, the stomach to watch rats, or the audacity to imagine skyscrapers destroyed. In this sense the city is far from sterile—rather it is a potential hotbed for radical environmentalist thinking. ◆

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