Slow Violence, Neoliberalism, and the Environmental Picaresque

It is only right, to my mind, that things so remarkable, which happen to have remained unheard and unseen until now, should be brought to the attention of many and not lie buried in the sepulcher of oblivion.

—Anonymous, Lazarillo de Tormes

A quarter century ago, Raymond Williams called for more novels that attend to “the close living substance” of the local while simultaneously tracing the “occluded relationships”—the vast transnational economic pressures, the labor and commodity dynamics—that invisibly shape the local. To hazard such novels poses imaginative challenges of a kind that writers content to create what Williams termed “enclosed fictions” need never face, among them the challenge of rendering visible occluded, sprawling webs of interconnectedness. In our age of expanding and accelerating globalization, this particular imaginative difficulty has been cast primarily in spatial terms, as exemplified by John Berger’s pronouncement, famously cited in Edward Soja’s Postmodern Geographies: “Prophecy now involves a geographical rather than a historical projection; it is space and not time that hides consequences from us. To prophesy today it is only necessary to know men [and women] as they are throughout the world in all their inequality.”
Yet the legitimate urgency of spatial prophecy should not, in turn, distract us from the critical task—especially for environmental writers—of finding imaginative forms that expose the temporal dissociations that permeate the age of neoliberal globalization. To this end, Animal’s People, Indra Sinha’s fictional reworking of the Bhopal disaster, offers a powerful instance of a writer dramatizing the occluded relationships of transnational space together with time’s occlusions. Sinha’s novel stands (to adapt Williams’s phrase) as a work of “militant particularism,” yet it discloses through that radical particularity temporal and spatial webs of violence on a vast scale.\(^3\) Sinha’s approach to the aftermath of the catastrophic gas leak at Union Carbide’s Bhopal factory in December 1984 throws into relief a political violence both intimate and distant, unfolding over time and space on a variety of scales, from the cellular to the transnational, the corporeal to the global corporate. Animal’s People can be read as a novel of risk relocation, not just in Susan Cutter’s spatial sense but across time as well, for the transnational off-loading of risk from a privileged community to an impoverished one changes the temporal topography of fear in the long term.

The power of Animal’s People flows largely from Sinha’s single-handed invention of the environmental picaresque.\(^4\) By creatively adapting picaresque conventions to our age, Sinha probes the underbelly of neoliberal globalization from the vantage point of an indigent social outcast. His novel gives focus to three of the defining characteristics of the contemporary neoliberal order: first, the widening chasm—within and between nations—that separates the megarich from the destitute; second, the attendant burden of unsustainable ecological degradation that impacts the health and livelihood of the poor most directly; and third, the way powerful transnational corporations exploit under cover of a free market ideology the lopsided universe of deregulation, whereby laws and loopholes are selectively applied in a marketplace a lot freer for some societies and classes than for others.

A neoliberal ideology that erodes national sovereignty and turns answerability into a bewildering transnational maze makes it easier for global corporations like Union Carbide to sustain an evasive geopolitics of deferral in matters of environmental injury, remediation, and redress. Thus, among the many merits of Sinha’s novel is the way it gives imaginative
definition to the occluded relationships that result both from slow violence and from the geographies of concealment in a neoliberal age.

Slow Violence, Chernobyl, and Environmental Time

Maintaining a media focus on slow violence poses acute challenges, not only because it is spectacle deficient, but also because the fallout’s impact may range from the cellular to the transnational and (depending on the specific character of the chemical or radiological hazard) may stretch beyond the horizon of imaginable time. The contested science of damage further compounds the challenge, as varied scientific methodologies may be mobilized to demonstrate or discount etiologies, creating rival regimes of truth, manipulable by political and economic interests. Moreover, the official dimensions of the contaminated zone may shrink or dilate depending on which political forces and which research methodologies achieve the upper hand. What emerges, then, is a contest over the administration of difference between those who gain official recognition as sufferers and those dismissed as nonsufferers because their narratives of injury are deemed to fail the prevailing politico-scientific logic of causation; or for that matter, because they lack the political contacts to gain admission to the inner circle of certified sufferers and thus to potential compensation. These unstable, complex procedures—and hierarchies—of toxic recognition may create novel forms of biological citizenship, as in the long aftermaths of the 1984 Bhopal disaster and the 1986 Chernobyl explosion.

The varieties of biological citizenship that emerged in the aftermaths of Bhopal and Chernobyl were distinct in certain ways, as were the media responses. Chernobyl received far more sustained attention in the Western media for several reasons. First, because of Chernobyl’s proximity to Western Europe, it was perceived as an ongoing transnational threat to “us” rather than a purely national threat that could be imaginatively contained as an Indian problem, over there among the faceless poor of the third world. Moreover, during the rise of Reagan’s and Thatcher’s neoliberal orders, Chernobyl could be directly assimilated to the violent threat that communism posed to the West, a threat that increased calls for heightened militarization and, ironically, for further corporate and environmental deregulation in the name of free-market forces. Bhopal, by contrast,
slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor

was easier to dissociate from narratives of global violence dominated by a communist/anticommunist plotline, thus obscuring the free-market double standards that allowed Western companies to operate with violent, fatal impunity in the global South. Indeed, Warren Anderson (then Union Carbide’s chairman), company lawyers, and most of America’s corporate media argued in concert that blame for the disaster was local not transnational in character, ignoring the fact that in the run up to the disaster, the parent company had slashed safety procedures and supervisory staff in an effort to staunch hemorrhaging profits.6

In reading Animal’s People as, among other things, an exposé of these neoliberal double standards, we can recognize Khaupfur as both specific and nonspecific, a fictional stand-in for Bhopal, but also a synecdoche for a web of poisoned communities spread out across the global South: “The book could have been set anywhere where the chemical industry has destroyed people’s lives,” Sinha observes. “I had considered calling the city Receio and setting it in Brazil. It could just as easily have been set in Central or South America, West Africa or the Philippines.”7

Chernobyl occurred three years before the Soviet Union’s dissolution in 1989, which was also the year John Williamson coined the term “the Washington Consensus” to describe the prevailing ideology that united the World Bank, the IMF, and the U.S. Treasury Department around the preconditions for “development aid” to nations in the global South.8 The developmentalist, neoliberal ideology of the Washington Consensus became a crucial foreign policy wing of what George Soros would term “market fundamentalism,” a broad crusade that would continue to gather force amid the postcommunist ideological uncertainty through demands for deregulation, privatization, and the hacking back of government social programs and safety nets. It was in this neoliberal context that, ultimately, the ailing survivors of both Bhopal and Chernobyl would find themselves sinking or swimming.

From a temporal perspective, the Chernobyl disaster of April 26, 1986, was distinguished by an initial catastrophic security lapse followed by a series of time lapses. The initial catastrophe was spectacular but, in media terms, deferred: eighteen days passed before Mikhail Gorbachev appeared on TV to acknowledge the explosion.9 Had the Soviet government dispensed nonradioactive iodine pills during that lost time, it could
have averted the epidemic of thyroid cancers that only began, en masse, four years later at the time of the breakup of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a Ukraine that was officially independent yet bound in environmental, epidemiological, and consequently economic terms to the Soviet-era nuclear disaster.

The different timelines of mutation—international, intranational, intergenerational, bureaucratic, and somatic—are dizzying even to attempt to map. The prevailing winds carried the radiation plume north over Belarus, across eastern, western, and northern Europe, and beyond. Over time, through toxic drift, the national epicenter of the catastrophe would shift so that Belarus, not Ukraine, would become the country most pervasively polluted.¹⁰ In both countries, radiochemical poisoning coursed through air, water, soil, crops, meat, and mother’s milk at divergent speeds. Some symptoms manifested themselves relatively quickly, others appeared most dramatically among children born a decade or more after the disaster struck. The stratified slow violence of the fallout was compounded by the tardiness of the Soviet authorities, whose reflex response was foot-dragging, equivocation, and denial.

Adriana Petryna’s anthropological work on post-Soviet Ukraine persuasively demonstrates the complex entanglements between environmental fallout and the socioeconomic fallout of being classified as a sufferer or nonsufferer. Compensation for Chernobyl injuries that rendered a citizen an official sufferer might be a mere $5 per month. But after Washington Consensus-style market liberalization was imposed on Ukraine in 1992, hyperinflation and mass unemployment followed, creating a sudden chasm between economic survivors and economic casualties.¹¹ In this neoliberal context, official recognition as a Chernobyl sufferer-survivor—and the modest government compensation that ensued—could make the difference between subsistence and starvation for a whole family.¹² The onus of proof fell on Ukrainians to develop, over time, an intimate expertise that was both bodily and bureaucratic. Which symptoms counted and which were discounted by the state? What work history in which officially recognized affected areas (and for how long) would strengthen one’s claim for the imprimatur of sufferer? Which doctors, lawyers, and bureaucrats could accelerate one’s efforts to enter that inner circle? How could one meet such influential people? Did they need to be bribed?
The ground rules for being counted and discounted kept changing. Even the boundaries of the pollution zones were unstable, shrinking and dilating through a mixture of bureaucratic caprice, economic expediency, and slippery science. So the system required energetic, up-to-date pro-activism on the part of Ukraine’s biocitizens as they scrambled to avoid plummeting into economic free fall. A key survival strategy was to fit their life stories, their self-narrations, into the limited generic narratives of suffering that possessed a state mandate from which a small stream of compensation might flow. New categories of identity emerged that—in other societies, in other times—might have remained confined to the domain of private medical records. Instead, a Ukrainian might introduce herself, position herself publicly, by announcing, “I am a mother of a child who is a sufferer. I am an evacuee from Zone Two. My husband is a Chernobyl worker, Category One.”

Foreign Burdens: Chernobyl, Bhopal, and *Animal’s People*

Within ten days of the Chernobyl explosion, the Soviet authorities had mobilized thousands of Ukrainian coal miners to help with remediation work at the disaster site. One of them, Dmytro, who labored at the site for a month, was later afflicted with pulmonary, cerebral, and cardiac disorders and found to have chromosomal aberrations. In an interview, he portrayed his body’s radiation load as a “foreign burden.” He was referring—as his interviewer notes—to the sense of harboring an alien, unnatural, and disquieting force within.

But the miner’s choice of phrase deserves a second parsing, one directly pertinent to my reading of *Animal’s People*. Dmytro had been saddled, I would argue, with a “foreign burden” not just in a somatic but in a ge-temporal sense as well: his post–Soviet Ukrainian body remained under occupation by a Soviet-era catastrophe. For in the case of Chernobyl, not only did the radiological toxicity travel across the national border, but (as the Soviet Union fragmented) the national border traveled across the toxicity. The Ukrainian body politic, though politically autonomous, remained environmentally and epidemiologically dominated by the “foreign burden” of a ghosted country, by a Soviet past that (as Faulkner would have it) was not even past. Through the workings of slow violence across environmental
time, Ukraine’s sovereignty was compromised. If the Ukrainian body politic at large was afflicted with the burden of involuntary macro memory, mutagenic chromosomes at the micro level sustained a Soviet heritage that prompted Dmytro (and many compatriots) to refuse to reproduce for fear of a future burdened by an afflicted Ukrainian child.

The concept of the foreign burden offers a productive prism through which to approach Sinha’s novelistic response to the Union Carbide disaster when, one early December night, a cloud of methyl isocyanate gas (in combination with other toxins) leaked from the company’s pesticide factory in Bhopal. Estimates of those killed immediately vary wildly, from 4,000 to 15,000 people. In the years that followed, scores of thousands of deaths and life-threatening disabilities were linked to exposure to the gas cloud. By some estimates, 100,000 residents continue to be afflicted.15

Although Animal’s People is set twenty years after the disaster, the novel dramatizes the illusion of the singular event: from a narrative perspective, the events—like the poisons themselves—are suspended in medias res, in a state of environmental, epidemiological, political, and legal irresolution. If the unfolding of slow violence across environmental time is typically managed through powerful strategies of distantiation, in Sinha’s novel those distancing strategies depend primarily, in geographical terms, on transnational corporate distance and, in temporal terms, on both the slow emergence of morbidity and on legal procrastination, which provide prevaricative cover for the CEOs who wish to exploit time to defuse the claims of the afflicted. Khaufpur (Sinha’s fictional Bhopal) is the “world capital of fucked lungs”; it is also a place of interminable trials—bodily and legal.16

For twenty years the immiserated people of Khaufpur have been trying to bring the American CEOs of the corporation responsible—named simply as the “Kampani”—to stand trial in India. Thirteen judges have come and gone in successive trials, but the spectral Kampani bosses keep failing to materialize, maintaining their oceanic distance from a city infiltrated and haunted by Kampani poisons. Playing for time, the Kampani resorts to legal chicanery, political bribery, and backroom deals with India’s Minister for Poison Affairs and his colleagues. What emerges, then, is a contest between the tenacity of corporeal memory and the corrosive power, over time and space, of corporate amnesia emboldened by a neoliberal regime of deregulation.
If Chernobyl’s “foreign burden” is an inheritance from an evaporated empire, we may read Khaufpur’s burden rather differently as the weight of absentee corporate colonialism, whereby transnational companies internalize profits and externalize risks, particularly in impoverished regions of the global South. However, as a novelist, Sinha cannot afford to be this explicitly polemical. An observation by the Irish writer Eavan Boland is pertinent to the novelistic challenges Sinha must negotiate: “If the voice of a character in a fiction speaks too clearly with the anger and hindsight of an ethical view of history, then the voice may be made louder by argument but grow less convincing through being less imagined. Then both humanity and history can be sentimentalized.”17 Because novels about slow violence suffer from a drama deficit, they risk resorting to sentimentality and political moralizing as substitutes for arresting spectacle and narrative tension. For these reasons some critics, like Anthony Lane, have gone so far as to assert that “eco-drama . . . is a contradiction in terms.”18

Sinha astutely negotiates this ethical and dramatic minefield without compromising his novel’s political energies. He does so by devising a narrator who is at best ambivalent toward the pursuit of justice, yet whose physical form serves as a bodily shorthand for Khaufpur’s transnational plight. Through a literal twist of fate—a toxic corkscrewing of his spine—Animal morphed at the age of six from an upright boy into a creature reduced to going around on all fours.19 When four-footed Animal (now nineteen) transports an ailing child on his back, his posture is precisely that of a beast of burden. Thus the symbolic economy of Animal’s body affords Sinha an implicit yet unforgettable image of a body politic literally bent double beneath the weight of the poisoned city’s foreign load.

By making an occluded economic relationship physically manifest through his narrator’s body, Sinha thus ingeniously resolves the dilemma that Williams posed: how to give a novel a local materiality while exposing the web of transnational forces that permeate and shape the local. In the process, Sinha engages a temporal question that Williams did not specifically address: how do you dramatize the costs of uneven development when their delayed effects are intimate but their genesis is far-off in time?

Animal’s People stages a simultaneous inquiry into the border zones between human and animal and the economic boundaries between rich and poor, the ever-deepening, dehumanizing chasm that divides those
who can act with impunity and those who have no choice but to inhabit intimately, over the long term, the physical and environmental fallout of actions undertaken by distant, shadowy economic overlords. What does it mean, the novel asks, to belong to the same species—in biological, existential, ethical, and economic terms?

Figure 2 Photograph of “Animal” sculpture. Reproduced by permission of the artist and photographer, Eleanor Stride.
Orphaned when the Kampani explosion killed both his parents, Animal has little truck with the niceties of belonging. His familial isolation, physical difference, and moral disgust at human inhumanity combine to set him apart. Despite his singularity, however, Animal also serves as a symbolic condensation of the vast army of the economically orphaned, abandoned to their fate by the merciless logic of the neoliberal marketplace.

Animal is a foundling who has morphed into a posthuman changeling, a one-of-a-kind creature spawned by a kind of chemical autochthony. Marooned in the present, Animal views himself as a four-footed species without precedent or the prospect of progeny, the alpha and omega of his kind. We can read him as a new beginning, which (in keeping with the novel’s apocalyptic tenor) doubles as the end of time.

Animal has forgotten his childhood human name: it’s as remote, as inaccessible as his city’s culturally rich, prelapsarian, pretoxic past. From the moment children at the orphanage taunt him for walking like an animal, he embraces the name of his alienation and abasement, scoffing at those, like Zafar (the slum’s chief anti-Kampani activist), who suggest that he is not a beast just an “especially abled” human. The catastrophe that has befallen Khaufpur, imposing on the city a radically changed culture of nature, has in the process converted Animal into a figure who insists, “I’ve no choice but to be unnatural.”

His refusal of the natural is redolent of the stance adopted by Chernobyl’s self-declared “biorobots” who, through hazardous exposure, inhabited a related gray zone between the human and the posthuman. Four months after the initial Chernobyl explosion, the Soviet authorities sent in robots to remove radioactive debris; when off-the-charts radiation levels rendered the robots dysfunctional, young men were conscripted to replace them. The men recognized they were being treated not as human employees but as “biological resources to be used and thrown out. . . . [S]lated for bio-robotic death.” As the Ukrainian director of the Ministry of Health declared, “no one has ever defined the value of a human here.” In this context, it is understandable that the young men would insist on their indeterminate status, not as human citizens, but as biorobots destined for the scrap heap of expendable parts. Like Animal, whose humanity was subject to a hostile foreign takeover, the biorobots exemplified the dissolution of the boundaries of their humanity through the slow, corrosive violence of environmental catastrophe.
The Environmental Picaresque, Abjection, and the Urban Poor

Animal joins a long line of picaros: canny, scheming social outliers governed by unruly appetites, potty-mouthed and scatalogically obsessed, often orphaned outcasts who, drawn from polite society’s vast impoverished margins, survive by parasitism and by their wits. The picaro is the abject from which the body and the body politic cannot part. Stigmatized as aberrant and filthy, the picaro embodies everything the socially remote privileged classes, with their ornate rhetoric and social etiquette, seek to contain, repress, and eject. But the picaro keeps resurfacing as a discomfitting reminder of the limits to the social barriers and the studied amnesia that elite society strives to uphold. Julia Kristeva’s formulation of the abject thus offers a productive analytic frame for Animal’s People, a picaresque novel about the dissociative rituals of a neoliberal transnationalism determined to disown, across time and space, the toxic repercussions innate to its practices, repercussions that will return to haunt it.

Sinha’s poisoned picaro embodies—at a somatic and a transnational level—the conditions under which, in Kristeva’s terms, “the subject finds the impossible within.” The unsettling confrontation with the abject entails facing “those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal.” This confrontation with stray territory results in repeated efforts to cast out the threatening traces of animalism from the culture. If we associate abjection with the rupturing of systemic order and sealed identity from within, then Sinha has created in his picaresque Animal a potent compression of disturbing, porous ambiguity, a figure whose leakiness confounds the borders between the human and the nonhuman as well as the borders between the national and the foreign. His presence exposes the limits of disownership: he is an irrepressible, abject reminder of that from which the Kampani—however far off it may seem—can never fully part.

Since the Spanish Golden Age, the picaresque has posed questions about the class and gender politics of crime, contrasting the narrator’s peccadilloes with the weightier crimes that society’s overlords commit and from which they are structurally exonerated. This passion for interrogating the hypocrisies of criminality—above all, the inequitable definitions of crime—makes the picaresque a promising fit with the priorities of the environmental
justice movement. Sinha, in repurposing the picaresque, brings into brilliant focus the environmental, epidemiological, and economic fallout of the terrors that transnational neoliberal lawlessness dispenses in cahoots with corrupt, legally immune local politicians.

The picaresque emerged between 1550 and 1559 in the Spanish Golden Age as a countergenre, a reminder that, for all the infusion into Spain of transatlantic imperial wealth, the great majority of Spaniards remained deeply poor. The genre—most famously in Lazarillo de Tormes—was countergeneric in tone as well, rich in bawdy street argot that clattered, in subversive counterpoint, against Spanish as imperial language and against the attendant ascendancy of classical literary forms. The picaresque thus inserted itself into a historical moment when a chasm was opening between the exalted, gluttonous classes with their linguistic refinements and perfumed pretensions and the indigent masses for whom life was an hourly scramble for survival. As in our own age of ballooning CEO golden parachutes soaring above a planet of the slums, the picaro achieves a particular potency as a marginal literary figure, a seldom-heard voice, who belongs nonetheless to the statistical majority. His or her existence depends on quick-witted improvisation coupled to expedient parasitism. As such, the picaro survives, in Michel Serres’s fine phrase, as a “tactician of the quotidian.”

Within the genre’s comedic arc, the picaro typically pursues a quest of upward mobility; in Animal’s case that quest becomes an elaborate pun subverting any ethical correlation between moral and physical erectness. He is witheringly dismissive of the artistry with which humans—most notably those in power—perform spectacles of rectitude. From his vantage point on humanity, Homo looks neither sapiens nor erectus, but a morally debased species whose uprightness is mostly posturing. Animal’s bent posture, by contrast, embodies a crushing neoliberal, transnational economic relationship and also marks him as a literal “lowlife,” a social and anatomical outlier whose physical form externalizes the slow violence, the unhurried metastases coursing through the community. His penumbral human/posthuman identity places a constant strain on the idea of limits (environmental, economic, ethical, and biological). In refusing the tainted designation “human,” Animal remains for most of the novel defiantly otherwise. What one witnesses, then, is Sinha adaptively carrying
forward what Giancarlo Maiorino has termed “the antihumanist core of the picaresque.”

Together, the antihumanist and parodic strains that permeate the picaresque help Sinha ward off three threats to the dynamism of fictional eco-drama: predictability, sentimentality, and a political outrage or self-righteousness that supplants depth of character. Animal, like most picaros, is not expressly political; he positions himself at an angle to Khaupfur’s environmental justice movement and for much of the novel is more troubled by his tenacious virginity than by the toxic tenacity of his environment. Yet, as a product of that environment and as a denizen of the community of the poisoned abject, Animal poses profound questions about the limits and value of the human. He does so, however, not from some concern with abstract justice but from inside the highly unpredictable business of holding body and soul together at street level.

Paradoxically, Animal appears as unique but not exceptional: in his singularity he serves as a synecdoche for the spectrum of mutations to which Khaupfuris have been subjected over time, ranging from the celebrated singer with now-ravaged lungs to the chatty Kha-in-a-jar, a double-headed bottled fetus that envies Animal his external, unbottled freedoms. Unmistakably hypervisible, Animal is also by turns undetectable, passing beneath human eye level in a crowd, allowing him to slip porously, in the picaresque manner, between different social strata.

But there are spatial limits to how far he can venture in his infiltrations and exposes. In a masterstroke, Sinha’s deploys Animal’s physical form as not just a consequence but a condensation of occluded transnational economic relations. His picaro is literally outlandish, his twisted body the physical manifestation of extraterritorial, offshore capitalist practices. The novel tracks the economics of a transnational regime of contamination by posing questions about the limits to bodily integrity, in both the individual and the nation-state. The Kampani’s factory is located yet dislocated, inside India geographically yet elusively afloat, outside the reach (or at least the application) of Indian law. A novel narrated by a human animal—“a beastly boy”—bent out of shape by his foreign load simultaneously questions other forms of mutability, not least the plasticity of ownership, how foreign corporate practices inside India can be owned (for short-term profit) and disowned (for long-term consequences to environmental and human health). To return
this dissociative economic logic to a somatic language, we come to see the Kampani as both incorporated and unincorporated into the national body. The Kampani is so compendious, so omnipresent in its effects yet so visibly absent that, at one point, Zafar (leader of Khaufpur’s campaign for justice) declares the Kampani’s faceless power to be eternal. In that despairing moment, we’re given a fused nightmare of neoliberal corporate immunity and corporate immortality.

The picaresque proves uncannily effective at dramatizing another critical dimension to the environmentalism of the urban poor—their relationship to time. Like the picaro, the environmentally embattled slum dwellers are hell-bent on immediate survival, improvising from day to day, from hour to hour. Their temporal element is “now o’clock,” their lives subject to the fickle tyranny of the eternal today.36 Yet collectively, the city’s environmentally afflicted are bound in complex ways to past and future through the metamorphoses wrought by toxicity, the pursuit of social justice, and their collective relationship to apocalyptic time. The environmental picaresque of Animal’s People pivots on two apocalypses: the horrors of “that night” when the interminable narrative of poisoning began and the certainty that over the long haul, as the activist Zafar insists, the poor possess “the power of zero.”37 Global geopolitics may in the short term be skewed against them, but time is on their side: the Kampani has everything to fear from those with nothing to lose. Animal insists as much in the novel’s closing lines: “All things pass, but the poor remain. We are the people of the Apokalis. Tomorrow there will be more of us.”38 Animal’s final words uncannily echo the end of Planet of the Slums, Mike Davis’s powerful account of the contemporary neoliberal shantytown world from which, implicitly, the contemporary picaro emerges. “If the empire can deploy Orwellian technologies of repression,” Davis warns, “its outcasts have the gods of chaos on their side.”39

Reflecting on Hurricane Katrina, Michael Eric Dyson writes memorably of “the color of disaster” as integral to the “neoliberal neglect” that has plagued American politics for over twenty years.40 In keeping with Dyson’s stance, we can refuse the unsustainable divide between human disasters (like Bhopal and Chernobyl) and natural ones (like Katrina), dissociating ourselves, for example, from former president George W. Bush’s insistence that “the storm didn’t discriminate and neither will the recovery effort.”41
Discrimination predates disaster: in failures to maintain protective infrastructures, failures at pre-emergency hazard mitigation, failures to maintain infrastructure, failures to organize evacuation plans for those who lack private transport, all of which make the poor and racial minorities disproportionately vulnerable to catastrophe. As investigative Indian reporters, writing for publications like the *Hindustan Times* and *Statesmen* were quick to reveal, the Union Carbide disaster was preceded by a long history of structural neglect and a reckless flouting of elementary safety measures.\(^{42}\)

If we project Dyson’s national “color of disaster” onto a transnational screen, his phrase can be seen—like Animal’s apocalyptic final words—to point backward to global crimes of environmental racism (that treat certain communities as more expendable than others) and forward as a global portent. The poor of the world are the uncontainable color of a future that cannot be held in check. Yet there is another way to read that future, as a wager—however idealistic—to those in power to embrace the project of more equitable risk distribution, within the nation and beyond. The South African writer Njabulo Ndebele puts this case most forcefully:

> We are all familiar with the global sanctity of the white body. Wherever the white body is violated in the world, severe retributions follow somehow for the perpetrators if they are non-white, regardless of the social status of the white body. The white body is inviolable, and that inviolability is in direct proportion to the vulnerability of the black body. This leads me to think that if South African whiteness is a beneficiary of the protectiveness assured by international whiteness, it has an opportunity to write a new chapter in world history. . . . Putting itself at risk, it will have to declare that it is home now, sharing in the vulnerability of other compatriot bodies. South African whiteness will declare that its dignity is inseparable from the dignity of black bodies.\(^{43}\)

Three points are worth underscoring here. First, that international whiteness provides a second shield for national whiteness, a protective dynamic that has profound consequences for the way slow violence has unfolded across the global stage in a neoliberal age. Second, and relatedly, the internal distance between the inviolable body and the vulnerable body is widened
by being routed through international circuits of power. Third, implicit in Ndebele’s racial narrative of violation and retribution is the kind of environmental narrative that Sinha’s novel tells, whereby a corporate bastion of white power deploys a battery of distancing strategies (temporal, legalistic, geographical, scientific, and euphemistic) in the *longue durée* between the initial catastrophe and the aftermath. Through this battery of attritional, dissociative mechanisms, the transnational corporation strives to wear down the environmental justice campaigns that seek compensation, remediation, and restored health and dignity. Under cover of a variety of temporal orders, the company can hope that public memory and demands for restitution will slowly seep out of sight, vanishing into the sands of time.44

Yet the open-ended politics of catastrophic procrastination do not operate in isolation within the corporate realm. What of the roles of the state and science? If Ndebele exhorts the state to “jealously and vigorously protect all bodies within its borders and beyond,” he acknowledges this has seldom been the case.45 In Khaufpur the Chief Minister and the Minister for Poison Affairs, their palms well greased with bribes, provide local cover for the American Kampani while going through the motions of taking seriously the concerns of exposed locals.

The role of science is more complex. In Khaufpur—as in Bhopal—the transnational corporation withheld from the afflicted community details about the chemical composition of the insecticides it was producing at the site, profoundly weakening remedial prospects by denying those exposed precise scientific information. Small wonder that, when an American doctor arrives to open a free clinic in Khaufpur, local activists mount a boycott, viewing her as an agent of tendentious Kampani science—science whose long-term remit is to generate a circular narrative that will confirm the larger narrative of corporate self-exculpation or, at the very least, oil the machinery of doubt. From this skeptical perspective, the scientific process, like the legal one, provides further temporal camouflage, ostensibly uncovering what happened while deferring and occluding any decisive, actionable narrative.

**Terror Time and Shadow Kingdoms**

Khaufpur, translated from the Urdu, means "city of terror."46 The city’s poorest denizens inhabit a different terror time from the terror time projected
by the Kampani. When the slum-dwellers rise up nonviolently to protest the Kampani’s inaction, the Kampani, invoking the fallback international rhetoric of terrorism, demands that the protestors be tried in the very Indian courts the company itself has been evading. Back in America, the Kampani engages in corporate antiterrorist training exercises, staging mock abductions and executions of their employees by Khaufpuri “terrorists.” Khaufpuris, by contrast, face a clear and present danger of an environmental kind: an immanent and imminent terror, faceless yet physically intimate, percolating through the penumbral time of the aftermath that is also the suspended time of the illimitable in-between.

We all inhabit multiple temporal orders that often coexist in frictional states, shifting and sliding like tectonic plates. The predominance—and our awareness of—some temporal orders as opposed to others is shaped by where and how we live. We need to ask how directly, how forcefully a given community is impacted by the cycles of sun and moon; by ebbing and flowing tides; by shifts in the seasons, stars, and planets; by the arrivals and departures of migratory life; and by climate change in ways that are crosshatched with the migratory cycles of transnational capital, electoral cycles (local, national, and foreign), digital time, and the dictates of sweatshop time. Sinha hints at, for example, the unpredictable interface between digital and seasonal time when Animal discovers the “internest” on a computer. We can gloss his malapropism as fusing different ecologies of time: the “internest” is, after all, where images go to breed.

*Animal’s People* exposes the uneven timelines and multiple speeds of environmental terror: the initial toxic event that kills thousands instantly; the fatal fire that erupts years later, when the deserted but still-polluted factory reignites; the contaminants that continue to leach into the communal bloodstream; and the monsoon season that each year washes abandoned chemicals into the aquifers, repoisoning wells and producing new cycles of deferred casualties. Thus the initial airborne terror morphs into a waterborne terror that acquires its own seasonal rhythms of heightened risk.

Ordinarily, rural subsistence communities—“ecosystem people”—are attuned (and vulnerable) to different ecologies of time from those that impact the lives of the urban poor. This is not to suggest that ecosystem people possess some romantic, timeless, organic bond to the pulse of nature, but rather to acknowledge that their often precarious conditions
of survival depend on different combinations of temporal awareness. However, both rural and urban communities share a vulnerability to the vagaries, the haunting uncertainties, of what Ulrich Beck depicts as a “shadow kingdom”:

Threats from civilization are bringing about a kind of new “shadow kingdom,” comparable to the realm of the gods and demons in antiquity, which is hidden behind the visible world and threatens human life on their Earth. People no longer correspond today with spirits residing in things but find themselves exposed to “radiation,” ingest “toxic levels,” and are pursued into their very dreams by the anxiety of a “nuclear holocaust” . . . . Dangerous, hostile substances lie concealed behind the harmless facades. Everything must be viewed with a double gaze, and can only be correctly understood and judged through this doubling. The world of the visible must be investigated, relativized with respect to a second reality, only existent in thought and concealed in the world.51

In Beck’s depiction this imperceptible shadow kingdom is spatially recessed behind “harmless façades.” But his spatial trope warrants a temporal gloss as well: beyond the optical façade of immediate peril, what demons lurk in the penumbral realms of the longue durée? What forces distract or discourage us from maintaining the double gaze across time? And what forces—imaginative, scientific, and activist—can help extend the temporal horizons of our gaze not just retrospectively but prospectively as well? How, in other words, do we subject that shadow kingdom to a temporal optic that might allow us to see—and foresee—the lineaments of slow terror behind the façade of sudden spectacle?

We need to question here Beck’s assumption that “people no longer correspond today with spirits residing in things,” in other words, that the divine and demonic shadow kingdom “of antiquity” has been superseded by the modern shadow kingdom of toxic and radiological hazards. This sequential narrative of threat does not adequately convey the persistent vitality of the numinous within modernity. For the majority of our planet’s people (and this is something Sinha brings to life) the two kingdoms of toxic threat and
spiritual threat interpenetrate and blend, creating a hybrid world of technonuminous fears.

Sinha and Carson: Leakages and Corporate Evaporations

*Animal’s People* gives focus to the environmental politics of permeation and duration. Leakages suffuse the novel: gas leakages and category leakages, porous national borders and permeable fetal membranes, the living who are semidead and the dead who are living specters. What, the novel asks across a variety of fronts, are the boundaries of identity? Where do identities part or merge? How much change must an entity (an individual, a community, a corporation) undergo before it can assume the name of categorical difference, drawing a line across time?

On the subject of porous identities, it is worth noting one aspect of the Union Carbide story that Sinha, for whatever reasons, declined to enfold into his novel. In 2001, Union Carbide disappeared through that act of corporate necromancy known as the merger. Dow Chemical bought out Union Carbide, and so the name indelibly associated with disaster evaporated, further confounding the quest in Bhopal for environmental justice, compensation, remediation, and redress. Dow Chemical deployed this nominal vanishing act, this corporate shape-shifting, as a rationale for disclaiming responsibility for a disaster committed by a corporation that no longer exists. If with Chernobyl the environmental fallout outlasted the empire responsible, with Union Carbide the fallout outlasted the transnational company responsible. Thus Soviet imperial fracture and American corporate merger both effectively circumvented or off-loaded historical culpability for the continued slow violence of delayed effects.

The evaporation of Union Carbide exemplifies the gap between the relative immobility of environmentally afflicted populations and the mobility (in time and space) afforded transnational corporations. What the extinct company leaves behind is ongoing proof of the excellent durability of its products; as Animal notes sardonically, the Kampani clearly concocted “wonderful poisons . . . so good it’s impossible to get rid of them, after all these years they’re still doing their work.” The factory may have been abandoned, but the invisible poisons remain dynamic, industrious, and alive—full-time workers around the clock. The far less resilient biota, however,
express themselves primarily through the sensuality of absence: “Listen, how quiet,” Animal observes as he wanders the factory grounds. “No bird song. No hoppers in the grass. No bee hum. Insects can’t survive here.” Sinha’s rhetorical strategy here—his summoning of ecological carnage through negative presence—echoes “La Belle Dame sans Merci,” which Rachel Carson chose as the epigraph to *Silent Spring*: “The sedge is wither’d from the lake, / And no birds sing.” Sinha’s rhetoric calls to mind, too, Carson’s use of negative presence in the controversial “Fable for Tomorrow” that launches *Silent Spring*, where she evokes the plight of a devastated community. In a once harmonious American heartland town (dubbed Green Meadows in an early draft of *Silent Spring*), “[t]here was a strange stillness. The birds, for example—where had they gone? . . . The hens brooded, but no chicks hatched. . . . The apple trees were coming into bloom but no bees droned among the blossoms, so there was no pollination and there would be no fruit.”

Both Carson and Sinha give the absence wrought by toxicity a sensory density; in so doing they strike a complex temporal note, through blended elegy and apocalypse, lamentation and premonition, inducing in us a double gaze backward in time to loss and forward to yet unrealized threats. Through this double gaze they restage environmental time, asserting its broad parameters against the myopic, fevered immediacy that governs the society of the catastrophe-as-spectacle.

The blighted community Carson depicts in “A Fable for Tomorrow” did not exist in its entirety, although all the component disasters Carson fed into her composite, fictionalized portrait had occurred at some point somewhere in America. By clustering these scattered microdisasters into a single imaginary community, she sought to counter the dissociative thinking encouraged by the temporal and spatial dispersion of environmental violence, acts that in isolation would pass beneath the radar of newsworthiness.

Like Carson, Sinha has clearly grappled with the imaginative dilemmas posed by the diffusion of slow violence across environmental time. But his response is differently inflected, given that all the disasters he summons to mind had indeed been concentrated in a single community. The problem he tackled, moreover, was one Carson never addressed directly: how some afflicted communities are afforded more visibility—and more access to remediation—than others through the mechanisms of globalization,
environmental racism, and class discrimination. This discriminatory distribution of environmental visibility—intranationally and transnationally—lies at the heart of Sinha’s fictional endeavor.

Almost half a century earlier, Carson had protested that the scattershot victims of “herbicides” and “pesticides” ought to be recognized as victims of indiscriminate “biocides” instead. Sinha develops this idea of biocidal risk in terms redolent of Carson: one old Indian woman, bent double by the poisons, upbraids the Kampani lawyer thus: “you told us you were making medicine for the fields. You were making poisons to kill insects, but you killed us instead. I would like to ask, was there ever much difference, to you?” Yet Sinha departs from Carson in representing “pesticides” as both indiscriminate and discriminatory: their killing power exceeds their targeted task of eliminating troublesome insects, but they do discriminate in the unadvertised sense of saddling the local and global poor with the highest burden of risk. Thus, by implication, the biocidal assault on human life is unevenly universal.

Extraordinary Events, Ordinary Forgettings

Looking back at Chernobyl, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Bhopal, Petryna laments how “many persons who have survived these large-scale technological disasters have been caught in a long-term and vicious bureaucratic cycle in which they carry the burden of proof of their physical damage while experiencing the risk of being delegitimated in legal, welfare, and medical institutional contexts.” Such people, the illiterate poor above all, are thrust into a labyrinth of self-fashioning as they seek to fit their bodily stories to the story lines that dangle hope of recognition (possibly, though elusively), even recompense. In so doing, the poor face the double challenge of invisibility and amnesia: numerically, they may constitute the majority, but they remain on the margins in terms of visibility and official memory. From an environmental perspective, this marginality is perpetuated, in part, by what Davis terms “the dialectic of ordinary disaster,” whereby a calamity is incorporated into history and rendered forgettable and ordinary precisely because the burden of risk falls unequally on the unsheltered poor. Such disasters are readily dismissed from memory and policy planning by framing them as accidental, random, and unforeseeable acts of God, without regard for
the precautionary measures that might have prevented these catastrophes or have mitigated their effects.

At stake here is the role of neoliberal globalization in exacerbating both uneven economic development and the uneven development of official memory. What we witness is a kind of fatal bigotry that operates through the spatializing of time, by off-loading risk onto “backward” communities that are barely visible in the corporate media. Contemporary global politics, then, must be recognized “as a struggle for crude, material dominance, but also (threaded ever closer into that struggle) as a battle for the control over appearances.” That battle over spectacle becomes especially decisive for public memory—and for the foresight with which public policy can motivate and execute precautionary measures—when it comes to the attritional casualties claimed, as at Bhopal, by the forces of slow violence.

We have seen, in recent years, some excellent analytical books about the plight of the international urban underclass by Davis, Jeremy Seabrook, and Jan Breman, among others. However, the kind of visibility such books afford is very different from the visibility offered by a picaresque novel. For even the most eloquent social scientific accounts of the underclass, like social scientific accounts of environmental disaster, veer toward the anonymously collective and the statistical. Such accounts thus tend to be in the same gesture humanizing and dehumanizing, animating and silencing.

The dilemma of how to represent the underclass, the *infrahombres*, stands at the heart of the picaresque tradition. Like *GraceLand*, Chris Abani’s superb picaresque novel about ingenious desperation in a Lagos shantytown, *Animal’s People* stages a disaggregated irruption of a vivid individual life. Animal, speaking his life story into the Jarnalis’s tape recorder, is all charismatic voice: his street-level testimony does not start from the generalized hungers of the wretched of the earth, but from the devouring hunger in an individual belly. If the novel gradually enfolds a wider community—Animal’s people—it does so by maintaining at its emotional center Animal, the cracked voiced soloist, who breaks through the gilded imperial veneer of neoliberalism to announce himself in his disreputable vernacular. His is the antivoice to the new, ornate, chivalric discourse of neoliberal “free trade” and “development.”

Through Animal’s immersed voice, Sinha is able to return to questions that have powered the picaresque from its beginnings. What does it mean to
be reduced to living in subhuman, bestial conditions? What chasms divide and what ties bind the wealthy and the destitute, the human and the animal? What does it mean, in the fused imperial language of temporal and spatial dismissal, to be written off as “backward”?63

In Animal’s day-to-day meanderings, the impulse for survival trumps the dream of collective justice. Yet through his somatized foreign burden—and through the intrepid, blighted lives around him—Sinha exhumes from the forces of amnesia not just the memory of a long-ago disaster but the present and future force of that disaster’s embodied, ongoing percolations. The infrahombres—those who must eke out an existence amidst such percolations—are, the novel insists, also of this earth. Through his invention of the environmental picaresque, Sinha summons to the imaginative surface of the novel the underclass’s underreported lives, redeeming their diverse quirks and hopes and quotidian terrors from what, almost half a millennium ago, Lazaro recognized as “the sepulcher of oblivion.”64