

Relocating “Slow Violence” within the Discourse of Anthropocene in John Brunner’s *The Sheep Look Up*

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Abstract

On May 10, 2024, *The Times of India* reported that Venezuela was the first country to lose all its glaciers due to climate change. Now, the question arises: Whom should we hold accountable for that? The obvious answer is the Anthropos, who are responsible for the Anthropocene to which the earth’s geology, ecosystem, and climate are subjected. The discourse of Anthropocene questions the idea of a singular Anthropocene as, according to Claire Colebrook, there is no singular Anthropocene, but there are many. It also questions who/what affects and who/what is affected. The “biopolitics” of the Anthropocene is interlinked to violence. This violence exercises exclusionary politics and results in the gradual degradation of the environment that affects not only humans but every other entity on the earth and leads towards a precarious survival, which, according to Elizabeth Povinelli, is the “anthropology of ordinary suffering”. Rob Nixon introduced the phrase “slow violence”, which includes environmental degradation, long-term pollution and climate change. Taking the cue from Nixon’s concept of “slow violence”, this paper aims to relocate it within the discourse of the Anthropocene in John Brunner’s dystopian novel *The Sheep Look Up* (1972). The novel takes place in an unspecified year in the near future when human activities have resulted in the wholesale destruction of the environment. Therefore, this paper aims to use Nixon’s concept of “slow violence” along with John Galtung’s “structural violence”, Michel Foucault’s “making live and letting die”, and Giorgio Agamben’s “bare life” to show how human activities guided by economic greed, power, anthropocentric worldview, and global capitalism results in the ecological and climatological destruction. It will also try to show how the dystopian narrative can significantly shape ecological consciousness.

Keywords: ecodisaster, Anthropocene, slow violence, power, human and nonhuman.

We live in a time when the world is facing things we have encountered only in dystopian fiction. On May 10, 2024, *The Times of India* (Web) published a report declaring that Venezuela became the first nation to lose all its glaciers due to climate change. Now, the question arises: Who should we blame for that? The immediate and obvious answer is the Anthropos, who are responsible for the Anthropocene to which the earth's geology, landscape, limnology, ecosystem, and climate are subjected. The discourse of Anthropocene questions the idea of a singular Anthropocene as, according to Claire Colebrook, there is no singular Anthropocene, but there are many (10). It also questions who/what affects and who/what is affected. The narrative of the Anthropocene obscures the gendered, racist, and exploitative global capitalist system that is responsible for the ecological and climatological degradation and the destabilisation of the relative predictability of the planet's Holocene period. Inevitably, the discourse of the Anthropocene questions not only human activities but also other factors behind environmental degradation, and it expands the discourse of the Anthropocene. Moreover, the "biopolitics" of the Anthropocene is interlinked to violence. This violence exercises exclusionary politics and results in the gradual degradation of the environment that affects not only humans but every other entity on the earth and leads towards a precarious survival, which, according to Elizabeth Povinelli, is the "anthropology of ordinary suffering." Rob Nixon introduced the phrase "slow violence" (where violence is not necessarily visible but has a long-term effect), which includes environmental degradation, long-term pollution and climate change. Taking the cue from Nixon's concept of "slow violence," this paper aims to relocate it within the discourse of the Anthropocene in John Brunner's dystopian novel *The Sheep Look Up* (1972). The novel takes place in an unspecified year in the near future when human activities have resulted in the wholesale destruction of the environment, which, as a result, affects the economically weaker section and nonhumans the most. Therefore, this paper aims to use Nixon's concept of "slow violence" along with John Galtung's "structural violence," Michel Foucault's "making live and letting die," and Giorgio Agamben's "bare life" to show how human activities guided by economic greed, power, anthropocentric worldview, and global capitalism results in the ecological and climatological destruction that gives us a plausible picture of our future. As James John Bell in "Exploring the Singularity" writes, "The points of environmental destruction (clear cuts, oil spills, toxic pollution) have now become singular—climate change permeates and impacts all points of the globe, invasive species and biotech contamination is quickly replicating out of control, mercury and numerous other toxins are now found in just about everyone." Quoting the same, he writes in the afterword of Brunner's novel, "This is our world now, and it is also an accurate description of the state of ecological crises in *The Sheep Look Up*" (Bell 383).

The Sheep Look Up presents a harrowing vision of environmental collapse and societal disintegration. This novel is not merely a work of science fiction but a profound commentary on ecological degradation and the insidious nature of slow violence. Brunner's narrative explores the consequences of unchecked

industrialisation, pollution, and corporate malfeasance, drawing a stark picture of a world on the brink of ecological catastrophe. Through its intricate plot and vividly drawn characters, *The Sheep Look Up* serves as a cautionary tale, warning of the dire repercussions of humanity's exploitative relationship with the environment. Set in an unspecified near future, the novel presents a society in which pollution, climate change, and resource depletion have led to widespread ecological collapse. The novel's portrayal of environmental degradation is deeply intertwined with issues of social justice, as the economically marginalised and non-human entities are disproportionately affected by the environmental crisis. Brunner depicts a frightening picture of anthropocentrism in American society, which has been depicted as a society that values the human needs of a particular section of people who are rich and hold power. Before entering into the theoretical underpinnings of the novel, one must have an idea about the function of Anthropocene and anthropocentrism.

The "Anthropocene" is a term increasingly used to describe the current geological epoch, one defined by significant human impact on the ecosystems of our planet. This term, popularised by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer, suggests that human activities have become the dominant force shaping the planet's geology and climate to the extent that they have created a new era in the history of the Earth (Crutzen and Stoermer 17). The Anthropocene concept reflects the profound and often destructive influence of human actions on the environment, emphasising the urgency of addressing the ecological crises that characterise this epoch. Central to the discussion of the Anthropocene is the concept of anthropocentrism, a worldview that places human beings at the centre of the universe, valuing human life above all other forms of existence. Anthropocentrism has been a dominant perspective in Western thought, particularly since the Enlightenment, where the mastery and exploitation of nature were often seen as both a right and a necessity for human progress. This worldview has contributed to the environmental degradation that defines the Anthropocene, as it prioritises short-term human benefits over the long-term health of the planet. Anthropocentrism is evident in the way natural resources have been exploited without consideration for their ecological limits or the needs of other species. As environmental philosopher Val Plumwood notes, "The logic of domination, which underpins anthropocentrism, sanctions the treatment of the earth as a resource to be exploited for human ends" (Plumwood 52). This exploitation is a key driver of the ecological crises that define the Anthropocene, including climate change, deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and pollution. The consequences of these actions have been far-reaching, affecting not only the environment but also human societies, particularly the most vulnerable communities. Jason W. Moore's concept of "Green Arithmetic" becomes very relevant in this discussion. Moreover, Moore writes, "It is a curious term, but I can think none better to describe the basic procedure of environmental studies over the past few decades: Society plus Nature = History. Today it is Humanity, or Society, or Capitalism plus Nature = Catastrophe. I do not wish to disparage this model. It has been a powerful one" (4).

In general, the way we live our lives under capitalism tends to give us the impression that nature is our resource and that our actions are, on the other hand, our ecological footprints. It reflects Dipesh Chakrabarty's idea that "Human action" plus "Nature" equals a "planetary crisis" in *The Climate of History: Four Theses* (2009). Brunner's depiction of the harrowing impacts of human actions on nature resonates the same, as he writes:

About forty miles out of Medano, almost exactly due west of the border between California and Baja California, the boat hove to, drifting very slowly on the vast circulation of the Pacific. Even this far from shore, the night stank. The sea moved lazily, its embryo waves aborted before cresting by the layer of oily residues surrounding the hull, impermeable as sheet plastic: a mixture of detergents, sewage, industrial chemicals, and the microscopic cellulose fibres due to toilet paper and newsprint. There was no sound of fish breaking surface. There were no fish. (124)

Furthermore, the concept of the "Anthropocene" challenges anthropocentrism by highlighting the interconnectedness of all life on Earth and the need for a more sustainable and ethical relationship with the environment. As Bruno Latour argues, the Anthropocene "forces us to abandon the idea that humans are separate from nature" and instead recognise that "we are entangled with the natural world in ways that have profound ethical implications" (Latour 5). This perspective calls for a shift from anthropocentrism to a more ecocentric or biocentric worldview, one that acknowledges the intrinsic value of all life forms and the importance of maintaining the ecological balance that sustains life on Earth. In *The Sheep Look Up*, Dr. Thomas Grey, an eccentric character, writes an editorial to the editor of *The Christian Science Monitor*:

Admittedly, we alter the order of things by the way we live. But the same can be said of any organism. How many of those who cry out for vast sums to be spent on preserving coral reefs from starfish realize that the reefs are themselves the result of a living species' impact on the ecology of the planet? Grass completely revolutionized the 'balance of nature'; so did the evolution of trees. Every plant, every animal, every fish—one might safely say every humble microorganism, too—has a discernible influence on the world. (Brunner 65)

The Anthropocene underscores the limits of human control over nature and the unintended consequences of technological and industrial advancements. Brunner's novel serves as a powerful lens through which he uses a strategy to expose modern society's anthropocentric exploitation of natural resources and the scheme of slow violence that affects all elements of the environment. *The Sheep Look Up* gives us a framework to locate the violence, which is slow but creates indelible impacts on the environment within the discourse of Anthropocene that questions anthropocentrism.

Rob Nixon, in his seminal work *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), introduces the concept of “slow violence” as a way to describe forms of harm that are not immediately visible or dramatic yet have profound and lasting effects. Unlike the spectacular violence often depicted in media and literature, slow violence is characterized by its gradual, cumulative nature. It is the “violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (Nixon 2). In the context of the Anthropocene, slow violence becomes a crucial framework for understanding how environmental degradation, climate change, and other ecological crises unfold over extended periods, often with devastating consequences for marginalized communities. In *The Sheep Look Up*, Brunner depicts a world where the effects of environmental degradation are pervasive yet insidious, gradually eroding the fabric of society. The novel’s setting, a near-future America plagued by pollution, disease, and social unrest, exemplifies how slow violence operates on both a physical and psychological level. As the environment deteriorates, so too does the quality of life for the characters, leading to a sense of despair and hopelessness that mirrors the incremental nature of slow violence. For instance, the novel describes the air in major cities as being so polluted that it is barely breathable, a condition that has developed over years of industrial activity and regulatory neglect. Brunner writes, “The air stank. It wasn’t only the chemicals and the fumes; there was a deeper, more pervasive odour of corruption, the smell of a world rotting from within” (12). This imagery encapsulates the essence of slow violence, an omnipresent but often unnoticed force that steadily undermines the health and well-being of both individuals and the environment.

The Sheep Look Up vividly illustrates the environmental collapse that results from decades of industrial exploitation and governmental inaction, a collapse that can be understood as a form of slow violence. One of the most striking aspects of Brunner’s novel is its depiction of pervasive pollution. The air and water are contaminated to the point where they pose a constant threat to human health. The novel describes scenes where “the sky was a sullen, ochre color” (24) and where “rivers ran with a sluggish, poisonous ooze” (37). These vivid descriptions underscore the extent of environmental degradation and its impact on everyday life. The novel’s characters are acutely aware of the pollution that surrounds them, yet they are often powerless to change their circumstances. This sense of helplessness is exemplified in the character of Peg Mankiewicz, who notes, “You can’t escape it. It’s everywhere. In the air, the water, the food we eat” (45). This pervasive sense of environmental contamination reflects the insidious nature of slow violence, as the cumulative effects of pollution gradually erode public health and quality of life. The pervasive pollution, contaminated food and water supplies, and the spread of diseases are all consequences of long-term environmental neglect. These elements of the narrative reflect the cumulative impact of human activities that characterize the Anthropocene, where the effects of ecological degradation are not immediate but unfold over time, often disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable populations. For example, Brunner writes about the

character of Austin Train, a resident of a polluted urban area who suffers from chronic environmental pollution:

Something had infected his hair roots and eyebrows, that made the skin flake away in dry crusty yellow scurf and left little raw patches of exposed flesh. He rubbed in a lotion Mrs. Blore had recommended; she and her husband suffered from the same complaint, and so did the kids on the lower floor. The lotion certainly helped—his scalp wasn't nearly as sore as it had been last week. (78)

This individual suffering is emblematic of the broader societal impacts of environmental neglect, where entire communities are slowly debilitated by pollution. The novel's portrayal of environmental degradation is not limited to the physical destruction of the landscape but extends to the social and psychological impact on the characters. The slow violence of environmental collapse is evident in the gradual decline of public health, the erosion of social cohesion, and the pervasive sense of fear and anxiety that permeates the narrative. For example, the novel describes how constant exposure to polluted air and water leads to a rise in respiratory illnesses, birth defects, and mental health issues, creating a society that is physically and emotionally debilitated.

Brunner also highlights the unequal distribution of the effects of slow violence, with marginalised communities bearing the brunt of environmental degradation. This is exemplified by the character of Peg Mankiewicz, who lives in a poverty-stricken area where the pollution is particularly severe. Peg's life is a testament to the ways in which slow violence disproportionately affects the poor, as she struggles with chronic illness, a lack of access to clean water, and the constant threat of eviction. Her plight underscores the connection between environmental justice and slow violence, as the most vulnerable populations are often the most exposed to the long-term effects of ecological degradation. As Peg expresses her discontent to Zena, "What kind of future do we have, Zena? A few thousand of us living underground in air-conditioned caves, fed from hydroponics plants like Bamberley's? While the rest of our descendants grub around on the poisoned surface, their kids sickly and crippled, worse off than Bushmen after centuries of proud civilization?" (173). In this context, John Galtung's concept of "structural violence" becomes very important to the discourse of the Anthropocene more. "Structural violence" refers to the systematic ways in which social structures harm or disadvantage individuals and communities. Structural violence is often invisible, as it is embedded in the very fabric of society, manifesting in unequal access to resources, opportunities, and power.

In *The Sheep Look Up*, structural violence is evident in the unequal distribution of environmental harms, as the economically marginalised are disproportionately affected by pollution, climate change, and resource depletion. The novel's portrayal of the social hierarchy is a clear example of structural violence, as the wealthy and powerful are able to shield themselves from the worst

effects of environmental degradation, while the poor are left to suffer the consequences. The affluent characters in the novel live in gated communities with access to clean air, water, and food, while the poor are forced to live in polluted, toxic environments. This stark contrast between the living conditions of the rich and poor is emblematic of the broader patterns of environmental injustice that characterize the Anthropocene. Brunner's novel also highlights the role of global capitalism in perpetuating structural violence, as multinational corporations prioritize profit over environmental and social well-being. The novel's depiction of corporate greed and corruption serves as a critique of the capitalist system, which fuels environmental destruction and exacerbates social inequalities. The exploitation of natural resources for profit, without regard for the long-term consequences, is a key driver of the slow violence depicted in the novel. For instance, Jacob Bamberley, the heir to an oil fortune is the head of the Bamberley Trust. Jacob promotes Bamberley Trust as a philanthropic organization as it produces Nutripon, a food product that is grown hydroponically and is designed to bring relief to areas where people are suffering from famine. Bamberley, a powerful businessman supported by the American government, exports Nutripon to an African village called Noshri, where people are suffering from famine. Following the consumption of Nutripon, a number of the villagers in Noshri suddenly appeared to have lost their minds and were killing one another. Lucy Ramage, who is a nurse, reflects on the role of global capitalism in perpetuating structural violence in economically backward countries:

“Yes, I saw in Noshri what the imperialists are doing,” Lucy went on, staring straight ahead now. “The rich countries have ruined what they own, so they're out to steal from the people who have a little left. They want the copper, the zinc, the tin, the oil. And of course there's the timber, which is getting scarce.” She sounded as though she was reciting a memorized list. Probably was. “Now they've thought of a new way to get it—drive everybody crazy so they can't set up a strong stable independent government. It nearly worked at Noshri, would have done but for General Kaika, so now they're trying it in Honduras. (137)

The concept of structural violence is particularly relevant to the discourse of the Anthropocene, as it underscores the ways in which environmental harms are unevenly distributed along lines of class, race, and gender. The marginalized communities in *The Sheep Look Up* are not only victims of environmental degradation but also of the structural violence that perpetuates their suffering. The novel thus challenges readers to consider the social dimensions of the environmental crisis and to recognize how structural violence contributes to the unequal distribution of environmental harms.

In *The Sheep Look Up*, Brunner critiques the role of corporations and governments in perpetuating slow violence through negligence and apathy. The novel portrays a world where corporate interests dominate political decision-making, leading to policies that prioritize profit over public health and

environmental sustainability. This dynamic is central to the concept of slow violence, as it highlights how the structures of power and authority contribute to the gradual destruction of the environment and the exploitation of marginalised communities. The production of Nutripon is one such example, which clearly shows the government's apathy towards the destructive effect of the production. Similarly, the novel's depiction of political apathy towards environmental issues reflects the broader theme of slow violence. Despite mounting evidence of its severity, the government's failure to address the growing ecological crisis mirrors the real-world challenges of mobilising effective responses to slow violence. As Nixon notes, "political responses to slow violence tend to be hampered by the temporal dispersion of the violence itself, making it difficult to generate the sense of urgency required for meaningful action" (Nixon 10). This lack of urgency is evident in the novel's portrayal of government officials who are more concerned with maintaining the status quo than addressing environmental degradation's root causes. The slow violence depicted in *The Sheep Look Up* raises important ethical questions about responsibility and justice in the Anthropocene. As the novel illustrates, the consequences of environmental degradation are not evenly distributed, with marginalised communities suffering the most severe impacts. This inequity calls into question the ethical implications of environmental policies and practices, particularly in terms of their long-term effects on vulnerable populations.

Brunner depicts the right-wing government as indifferent to the alarming problems of ecological disasters. In reaction to the many catastrophes that have occurred, the President, known as Prexy, is only able to provide pithy quotes. As a result of the widespread occurrence of poisonings and famine, the government blames the communist rebels of Honduras and imposes martial control on the country. In an effort to quiet anyone who criticises it, it resorts to violence and tyranny to silence the critic. References are made to attempts to rein in the environmental destruction, but they are depicted as having made no difference to the state of the environment. Even so, one Republican Senator claims that the regulations are destroying American business. The apathy of the government is more visible when the entire country is affected by an epidemic in which 35 million people become infected. A genetically morphed pest called Jigra, resistant to DDT and other pesticides gives rise to ecological destruction. Jigras destroyed all the vegetable crops, leading the country to a dire food shortage. However, the government was reluctant to pay attention to saving the crops until the Jigras affected a large coffee farm that belonged to an affluent businessman. Jigras are not natural pests; they are genetically morphed by genetic engineering. The effect of Jigras is visible when Brunner writes:

The grass was patchy and they'd had to return several sections, at enormous cost. It wasn't due to lack of water... Also the leaves on some of the most magnificent shrubs were marred by dull dry coin-sized blotches, and the flowers seemed to be dropping almost before they opened, and beyond, over the mountains, hung this permanent veil of pale grey haze. (225-226)

Moreover, the government kept the people unaware of the truth about Jigras until the situation got out of their hands. The Jigras are modern weapons devised by humans that can destroy the whole ecological balance. As the President of America, Prexy, states:

We have been attacked with the most cowardly, the most monstrous, the most evil weapons ever devised by wicked men. We are the victims of a combined chemical and biological attack. You are all aware that our crops have failed disastrously last summer. We, the members of my cabinet and I, delayed announcing the truth behind that story in the vain hope that we might contain the threat of the Jigras. We can no longer do so. It is known that they were deliberately introduced into this country. They are the same pest which ruined the entire agriculture of Central America and led to the sad and unwished-for conflict in Honduras. (327)

Furthermore, Brunner also makes a scope to critique the role of the government or the people of power from the perspective of their participation in controlling the ecological disaster and saving the environment. Michel Foucault's concept of "biopolitics" refers to the ways in which states exert power over life, often through practices of "making live and letting die." In the context of the Anthropocene, biopolitics is evident in how certain lives are valued and protected while others are deemed expendable. Brunner's *The Sheep Look Up* offers a clear portrayal of biopolitics in action, as the state and corporate entities prioritize the lives of the wealthy and powerful while allowing the poor and marginalized to suffer and die. The novel's depiction of the government's response to the environmental crisis is a clear example of biopolitics. Rather than addressing the root causes of environmental degradation, the government focuses on managing the population through surveillance, control, and repression. The use of force to suppress environmental protests and the implementation of policies that disproportionately harm the poor are indicative of a biopolitical regime that prioritizes the interests of the elite over the well-being of the general population. This is evident when Peg asks Zena, "What kind of future do we have, Zena?" (173) and expresses her discontent about the fact that rich people are given all the facilities and poor people are forced to live on the poisoned surface without the basic amenities.

At the end of the novel, we see that Peg loses her faith in the government. Highlighting her disbelief, Brunner writes, "Great, Peg thought, taking her place among the reporters, rubbing her arm where she had received an obligatory injection. Against the new flu, the medic on the door had said, but not to put too much faith in it because it had been rushed into production" (349). It clearly indicates the failure of the government to secure the lives of its people. The novel also explores the dehumanizing effects of biopolitics, as the poor are reduced to mere "bare life." The concept of "bare life," is also relevant to the biopolitical dynamics in *The Sheep Look Up*. "Bare life" is a concept developed by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, particularly in his influential work *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998). The term refers to a state of existence

where an individual is reduced to mere biological life, stripped of political rights, legal status, and social recognition. In this condition, a person is excluded from the protection of the law and can be subjected to violence without consequence, existing in a liminal space between life and death. Agamben describes “bare life” as the condition of those who are excluded from the political community, existing only as “life that can be killed but not sacrificed” (Agamben 8). This concept is central to Agamben’s critique of sovereign power, which he argues operates by producing and maintaining this state of exclusion, where certain lives are deemed expendable or insignificant. “Bare life” thus becomes a key figure in understanding how modern states exercise control and violence over bodies, often under the guise of law and order. In the novel, the poor and marginalized are effectively reduced to bare life, as they are denied access to clean air, water, and food and are left to suffer the consequences of environmental degradation without recourse or protection. Furthermore, Brunner’s portrayal of biopolitics in the novel critiques how power operates in the Anthropocene, highlighting the exclusionary and dehumanizing practices that perpetuate environmental injustice.

All of this is enough to make *The Sheep Look Up* a mirror to hold before the modern world. The book’s portrayal of ecological dread and gloom resonated with our current reality. In the afterword of the novel, Brunner writes, “What frightens me in retrospect about *The Sheep Look Up*, with its vision of a world where pollution is out of control, is that I invented literally nothing for it, bar a chemical weapon that made people psychotic. Everything else I took straight out of the papers, and magazines...” (373). Thus, although John Brunner’s *The Sheep Look Up* offers a dystopian vision of the future, it portrays the present day. It also serves as a powerful warning about the consequences of environmental degradation and the urgent need for action. Brunner’s treatment of “slow violence,” “structural violence,” “biopolitics,” “bare life,” and “global capitalism” provides a critical lens to examine the environmental crisis and how it disproportionately affects marginalised communities. As we move forward in the Anthropocene, it is essential that we recognize the ways in which environmental degradation is shaped by social and economic inequalities and work towards creating a more equitable and sustainable future. Brunner’s novel serves as a powerful reminder of the stakes involved and the urgent need for action. Moreover, Brunner explored the idea of “dire warning” in *The Sheep Look Up*, telling a terrifyingly realistic tale of ecological collapse that is still eerily plausible today. In fact, he demonstrated that our living environment may stand alone as the major protagonist in a story with needs and crises that are just as tragic or captivating as those in any Greek drama.

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