What makes a city: nature and agency in the creative literature of New York City.

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What part does literary studies play in helping us conceptualise the overdetermined and interconnected agencies at work in New York City? I propose that sustained attention to literary representation, as a repository of architectural imagination, reveals the ways in which we conceptualise the distribution of agency in NYC’s development. Paul Patton argues that cities ‘are complex objects which include both realities and their description’. It follows that the stories we tell ourselves about NYC are an important dimension to the ‘inherent interdisciplinarity’ of the city.

This paper explores the way in which fictional representations of NYC register evolving attitudes towards urban design and the relative importance of non-human agency. It moves from the speculative cities of Hugo Gernsback’s Ralph 124C 41+ (1925) and Isaac Asimov’s Caves of Steel (1953), to Jonathan Lethem’s Chronic City (2010) and Kim Stanley Robinson’s New York 2140 (2017). These texts allow us to track the cultural shift from fantasies of domination towards a recognition of the way in which cities are the collaborative product of human and non-human actants.

Gernsback imagines a speculative NYC in which rain falls for exactly one hour a day. Asimov eradicates the ‘outdoors’. This is no longer the future we imagine for NYC. Lethem’s text reveals the ways in which the city resists intentional human-agency.
Similarly, Robinson’s climate disaster text explores ideas about how we might design, build, and live in a world of rising sea levels — a world that seemingly pushes back against fantasies of domination.

Working with ideas from Manuel DeLanda (who understands the city as an ‘ecosystem’), I will argue that literary texts help us to imagine the way in which NYC operates with permeable boundaries, within a global ecological network, despite an aesthetic and phenomenological fetishization of the local.

• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Paul Cockburn is an AHRC funded PhD researcher in the English Studies department at Durham University working in ecocriticism and literary theory. His thesis, ‘Concrete Jungle: Imagining Nature in the Literature of New York City’, looks at representations of non-human nature in the creative literature of NYC. He asks what we talk about when we talk about nature in an urban setting. His aim is to develop a way of reading urban texts that is sensitive to the work of conceptual metaphor in crossing the domains of the natural and the artificial in order to reveal the ways in which cities are implicated in an ecological web. Paul currently co-convenes Durham’s departmental seminar series Inventions of the Text. A Liverpudlian by birth, he lived and studied in New York City for an academic year but is now based back in Liverpool, UK. He loves cities and mountains and cats.