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## Resilient Virtue and the virtues of resilience: Post-Bhopal ecology in animal's people

### **Abstract**

In her remarkable 2001 book, *Advocacy After Bhopal: Environmentalism, Disaster, New Global Orders*, Kim Fortun meditates on the challenges, both ethnographic and political, of addressing the aftermath of the 1984 explosion of the Union Carbide factory in Bhopal, India. The complex magnitude of the disaster, which killed as many as 10,000 people instantly, sickening up to 60,000, a large number of whom ended up dying in the ensuing decades, encompasses a long and uncertain timeframe, and a vast range of scales, reaching, as Rob Nixon notes 'from the cellular to the transnational, the corporeal to the global corporate' (444). There are related problems of agency and of epistemology, both legal and scientific.

SUSIE O'BRIEN

## Resilient Virtue and the Virtues of Resilience: Post-Bhopal Ecology in *Animal's People*<sup>1</sup>

In her remarkable 2001 book, *Advocacy After Bhopal: Environmentalism, Disaster, New Global Orders*, Kim Fortun meditates on the challenges, both ethnographic and political, of addressing the aftermath of the 1984 explosion of the Union Carbide factory in Bhopal, India. The complex magnitude of the disaster, which killed as many as 10,000 people instantly, sickening up to 60,000, a large number of whom ended up dying in the ensuing decades, encompasses a long and uncertain timeframe, and a vast range of scales, reaching, as Rob Nixon notes 'from the cellular to the transnational, the corporeal to the global corporate' (444). There are related problems of agency and of epistemology, both legal and scientific. As Fortun notes, Bhopal is

a disaster that has persisted, and operated cumulatively, drawing in a spectrum of issues that can't be contained by old blueprints for social change. The 'people' cannot represent themselves in the rehabilitation effort. Nor can the state stand in as guardian. Technoscience must be condemned, while it is relied on. Legality must be pursued, while acknowledged as an insufficient remedy. (xvii)

These issues combine to create a series of contradictions or double binds, which determine the framework for Fortun's work as an anthropologist and as an advocate. She reflects, somewhat unexpectedly:

The most important challenge was aesthetic. Advocacy within disaster — particularly against the law — called for a change in what I valued and experienced as good. Virtue had to be gauged in terms of resilience, rather than in terms of principled uprightness. Being well versed *in* the world became much more important than having an intellectual hold *on* the world. (5)

Fortun's use of the word 'resilience' is interesting. A concept that has come increasingly to the fore in the field of environmental studies, it makes an uncommon appearance here in the contexts of ethics and politics and, more unusual still, aesthetics. My objective in this essay is to explore further the idea of resilience as a way into the tangled net of global ecology in which Bhopal is caught. Working from the premise, underlined by Fortun, that its complexities are not just material and political but also discursive and even aesthetic, I use Indra Sinha's 2007 Booker-nominated novel, *Animal's People*, as a way of considering the usefulness and limitations of resilience for understanding and addressing global environmental justice problems within a postcolonial literary framework.

Resilience is generally understood in ecology as a system's capacity to retain its basic function and structure in the face of disturbance (Walker & Salt xiii). A resilient system is not one that maintains a stable state in the face of external challenges; rather, it is one that subsists by undergoing constant processes of change and adaptation. Key to resilience science is the recognition that living systems shift between periods of growth and conservation, and release and reorganisation. During these latter phases, which happen much more quickly, linkages are broken and new ones formed, order is replaced by 'uncertainty, novelty, and experimentation' (Walker & Salt, 82). So there's incessant movement between building up and conserving and breaking down. But complicating matters further is the multi-scalar nature of systems, what ecologist Buzz Holling calls 'panarchy', (Holling et al 89) such that each system contains, and is nested within other systems.<sup>2</sup> Each of these layers has its own cycles which, in a resilient system, work more or less independently, creating a kind of looseness that serves as a buffer for the larger system. A key point is that there is a negative correlation between efficiency and resilience. If we try to optimise a system's functioning, suppressing unwanted or apparently unnecessary processes with the aim of enhancing a particular desirable variable, the system becomes tighter and less resilient, more susceptible to suffering catastrophic breakdown in the face of disturbance. There is a crucial contradiction here between integrity and dissolution: the more a thing remains resolutely itself, the more fragile it becomes. On the other hand, for resilience to signify anything at all, there must be some fundamental consistency of being or activity; some meaning must persist over time. Another contradiction is that, while the resolution of problems depends on communication, *efficient* communication, in which a restricted range of universally legible signals move in predetermined directions through established channels, homogenises difference. It narrows the range of expressions and responses, making the system more vulnerable to unexpected shocks.

So a really crucial part of resilience theory is that life subsists through tensions, at every level of human and natural systems, between predictability and chaos, accumulation, preservation and breakdown, and there is a critical line between the sustainable function of these processes and the threat of total destruction. The risk of the latter is greatly increased by forms of instrumentalist management, whose aggressive suppression of redundancy, in the form of inefficient, apparently unproductive, strange or merely unknown parts of the system, destroys precisely those elements that enable the system to respond creatively when unexpected disturbances occur — as they inevitably, increasingly, do.

Resilience is a productive concept to think with in postcolonial environmental studies for a number of reasons, including its recognition of multiple scales and temporalities, and its acknowledgment of the interdependence of human and natural systems. Particularly critical for my purposes is the capacity it has to engage the tension that runs through both environmental and postcolonial criticism between

stability and change. What I mean by this is that, as politically inflected forms of critique, postcolonialism and ecocriticism have these interesting opposing — I think fundamentally irreconcilable — impulses towards conservation and resistance.<sup>3</sup> These impulses converge around the issue of environmental justice, in which a concern with protecting health and conserving traditional natural-cultural lifeways coexists with an imperative to justice, in which the exploitative relations of business-as-usual, including the concentration of power that masquerades under the name of democracy, can only be undone through the disruption of the regimes that protect those relations, by elements that were previously disenfranchised by them.

Resilience theory invites us to consider how that essentially political work might be conceived in natural terms. In pursuing this connection, I am drawing on the arguments made by scholars such as Bruno Latour, Bruce Braun, and Isabelle Stengers, that nature is in fact political — that's not 'nature' in scare quotes, as in 'nature' is just a political construction, but nature, human and non-human entities and processes, operates politically. Politicality, by the same token, is natural. I use the admittedly awkward term 'politicality' in support of the distinction made by French philosopher Jacques Rancière between what he terms 'politics' — which refers to the hierarchical power relations that prescribe everyday policies and procedures, or, as Rancière puts it, 'all the activities which create order by distributing places, names, functions' (Rancière 1994 173) and 'the political', which is always disruptive, consisting of a refusal to conform to assigned placements and the emergence of what remained unlawful or invisible in the existing order. Politics, in Rancière's formulation, has an aesthetic function, in the sense that it involves a particular 'partition' or 'distribution of the sensible' (2004 13), which determines what is perceptible and intelligible. Political activity disturbs this distribution; it 'makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise' (Rancière 1995 33). The political occurs as an interruption of normal politics; it institutes a break in the order of things, releasing energy, bringing new things into sight, creating space for the oppressed to flourish. This movement is arguably not just analogous to the adaptive cycles of resilience but integral to them. In what follows I explore the theme of resilience in Sinha's novel as a way of imagining possibilities of subsisting through and past disaster. As a work of fiction, *Animal's People* offers a fruitful site to work through what Fortun describes as the aesthetic challenge of the Bhopal disaster, and Rancière's concept of political aesthetics. The novel works both thematically and formally to offer, not a vision of post-Bhopal restoration, but a transformation of the terms of the disaster's intelligibility.

*Animal's People* is set in the imaginary Indian city of Khaufpur, nineteen years after a chemical leak from a factory owned by a US corporation identified only as 'the Kampani'. Narrated by Animal, so-called because the scoliosis that occurred as a result of the chemicals forces him to walk on all fours, the novel documents the Khaufpuris' quest for justice and the alleviation of their suffering. Their

struggles occur against, or rather through a backdrop of confounding complexity that mirrors the situation of Bhopal. First are the multiple, non-linear temporalities of the disaster — what Rob Nixon terms its ‘slow violence’ — which exceed the categories of science and law, through which health and justice are to be delivered. The privations of poverty compound the effect of toxicity. A Khaufpuri doctor cynically observes: ‘those poor people never had a chance. If it had not been the factory it would have been cholera, TB, exhaustion, hunger. They would have died anyway’ (153). The non-linearity and uncertainty of cumulative effects confound the efforts of victims to seek legal redress.

The multi-scalar level of the disaster also challenges articulation, let alone remediation. It is simultaneously an ongoing medical emergency, an environmental disaster effecting organisms, species and their eco-systems, a scientific problem, and a technology failure (or a ‘normal accident’ to use the language of technological risk-management [Perrow]). The factory manufactured pesticides, an important plank in the Green Revolution that industrialised food production in India: ‘You told us you were making medicine for the fields’, as one character puts it; ‘You were making poisons to kill insects, but you killed us instead’ (306) — a great example of the reverberating consequences of anti-resilience science and development policy. The disaster is also a symptom of the legal and political dilemmas produced in the wake of globalisation, in which the imperative of international justice jostles against the demands of national sovereignty and economic development. So the complex layering of scales has a fundamentally political component that determines what kind of knowledge and action are possible, at what level and to what effect. A significant difficulty is that even the best approaches to the problem will inevitably fail to address key parts of it, will impose order at the expense of irreducible differences, will foreclose on uncertainty and unpredictability in a way that compromises both sustainability and justice. Focusing on just one of these dilemmas in relation to Bhopal, Fortun argues:

Disaster demanded a legal response. But it was also beyond the scope of legal remedy — not only because the injuries suffered by gas victims could never be adequately categorized, much less compensated, but also because of the law’s way of being lawful (through adjudication and thus the reduction of dissenting arguments into a single judgment). The law demands generalization. The Bhopal disaster calls for such generalization, but it also calls for something more. (42)

*Animal’s People* illuminates the demand for ‘something more’ in the particularities of Animal’s story, which confound the generalisations on which the institutions of both law and care operate.

A key tension in the novel centres on the arrival of Elli, an American doctor who comes to set up a free clinic in Khaufpur for the Kampani’s victims. Given the urgent need for care, Elli is baffled when no one comes to the clinic. The Khaufpuris believe — wrongly as it turns out — that Elli has been hired by the Kampani to collect medical data in order to disprove their claims for compensation.

In part it is a failure of understanding: Elli exasperatedly points out that the kind of comprehensive study that could produce that kind of data could not possibly be produced by a single doctor in the three months before the company is scheduled to appear in court. But it is also a dilemma of another sort, experienced viscerally by the Khaufpuri people who are dying, literally, to have their suffering alleviated: Elli's promise to fix, restore and recover what has been broken, operates within a system whose smooth, ordered functioning has always worked not by helping but by excluding them. In the face of this knowledge, the political activist, Zafar, is quite rationally suspicious of the timing of the clinic's establishment before an important court date, and organises a boycott. When it appears that the Kampani will once again avoid prosecution by striking a deal, Zafar goes on a hunger strike — invoking and then subverting, publicly, shockingly, the objective of health and life preservation that to Elli are paramount.

Zafar's approach is more radical, certainly more political, at least on the surface of it, than Elli's: what both their efforts have in common is an appeal to existing systems of order, for restoration to and recognition within it for those who have been left out. For all his revolutionary energy, Zafar operates within a hierarchical system, albeit an unofficial one, in which his education and political credentials grant him authority. On this basis, his supporters dismiss Animal's intuition of Elli's good intentions, telling him 'Animal, you are special we all know it, but some things are just important to trust to feelings' (111), and 'Leave those decisions to people who know more' (194). The assumption that Animal does not know is based on his obscurity and unintelligibility, an otherness for which his name stands as a convenient, but untidy, shorthand. Animal's ambiguous status emerges most clearly in the words Elli shouts in frustration at the inhabitants of the Nutcracker (the slum where Animal lives): 'Animal's People! I don't fucking understand you!' (177).

Elli's lack of understanding (which she finally admits here) extends, Animal reminds us throughout the novel, to his readers, addressed throughout as 'Eyes'. The possibility of engagement — the kind that would allow the inhabitants of the Nutcracker, animals and people, to flourish — is thwarted by discourses of (Western) humanism, shot through with prurient fascination with the suffering bodies of the constitutively excluded. Given this impasse, it is highly significant, first, that animal opts in the end *not* to have the operation that would allow him to walk on two legs — that is, he chooses to remain an animal — and second, that it is Animal who mediates between Elli and his people, between Khaufpur and the West, as representative and as translator. That he is not 'really' an animal is pointedly not relevant: Animal's predicament highlights with excruciating specificity Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's argument that 'embodiment is an historical accident rather than a biological necessity' (Huggan & Tiffin 207). However it is an accident whose meaning and outcome, whose forms of remediation, are determined to a large degree by the discourse — scientific,

philosophical, literary, journalistic, philanthropic — of humanism. This discourse — the discourse that the readers inevitably inhabit in our reading of the novel — proscribes Animal's speech. And yet it is Animal who must be heard for the reader to make sense of things.

A couple of things to recall about resilience: life-sustaining change, when it occurs, emerges from the edge of the system, and it occurs through the displacement of established networks with novel forms of communication and unexpected conjunctions. Animal's struggle to trust Elli is one of many of these connections that arise in the novel, frequently defying understanding but, as Pablo Mukherjee observes in his recent essay on the novel, offering 'proof of Zafar's dictum that a struggle based on love is stronger than one based on hope' (230). Hope is singular and forward-looking, as implied in Elli's philosophy that 'the world is made of promises'. Love, by contrast, comes without guarantees; it is chaotic, non-linear, and relational. It resonates with, maybe even precipitates, political transformation (as opposed to politics).<sup>4</sup> In its incendiary, metamorphosing power, it counters and buffers the destructive forces of capitalism and chemistry unleashed on the fateful night, but it is similarly uncontainable.

So I am arguing that the novel is concerned with the fine line between destructive and redemptive change, and with the complex character of resilience, which rests on the seemingly irreconcilable imperatives of conservation and release, recovery and dissolution. These tensions are evident not just at the level of theme, but also in the form of the narrative itself, and the way it is inflected by its peculiar narrator, Animal, who embodies, more clearly than any other narrator could, the dilemma of the subaltern, part of the 'silenced majority' (Tiffin xiv) who is forced to find ways to be recognised by a system whose very existence is premised on his exclusion. The reader is reminded of this fact by the Editor's Notes, which explain that the story has been transcribed without revision, according to an agreement Animal made with a journalist, from a series of tapes translated from Hindi to English. This claim is contradicted by Animal, who boasts that he destroyed the original tapes, and also by the Editorial Notes themselves, which conclude by telling us: 'Some tapes contain long sections in which there is no speech, only sounds such as bicycle bells, birds, snatches of music and in one case several minutes of sustained and inexplicable laughter. A glossary has been provided'. The incongruous juxtaposition of the Notes' references to bicycle bells and laughter and the presence of a glossary speak to the contrary impulses, in Animal's story, towards the uncontainable truth — that which has no place in the prevailing 'distribution of the sensible', to use Rancière's phrase — and intelligibility. In its effort to express these contradictory imperatives without attempting to resolve them, *Animal's People* does not just describe but it also arguably contributes to the resilience of an environment defined, in Pablo Mukherjee's terrific phrase, as 'a network composed of agents who must share labor and information in order to survive' (230).



Having talked about the usefulness of resilience for thinking through post-Bhopal ecology, some caveats are in order. Like all biological metaphors, resilience has migrated quickly to the realm of popular and academic social theory, where it is deployed to legitimate a neoliberal ideology that finds its most aggressive expression in what Naomi Klein has termed disaster capitalism: the idea that out of catastrophe arises a fantastic diversity of investment opportunities, or, in a slightly different vein, an abdication of care for human and non-human others in favour of a vague belief in the capacity of everything to self-correct, or in the acceptability and inevitability of inequality which allows one to talk about the resilience of those who suffer.<sup>5</sup>

The final lines of *Animal's People* offer an equivocal gloss on the value of resilience in the struggle to dismantle systems of power: 'All things pass, but the poor remain. We are the people of the Apokalis. Tomorrow there will be more of us'. Animal's words call us to the resilience and creativity of the disenfranchised, but, to paraphrase Kim Fortun: '[they] also [call] for something more' (42). As the concept of resilience begins to gain currency in a range of discourses, from ecology to health and social policy, it is important not to allow it to overshadow other values such as care and advocacy for the unresilient, and the quest for social and environmental justice. And while environmental science offers a wealth of ideas about how to promote resilience, we need to ask more questions about where — in what systems, relationships, institutions, processes — we should try to promote resilience, and to what ends. The US military is currently engaged in a \$125 million dollar program to create more resilient soldiers (Rendon). Without discounting the value of finding ways to reduce the effects of PTSD, this project demands critique for two reasons: first, it represents the deployment of resilience-focused resources and communication in the interests of the already powerful. Second, and by extension, it represents an extraordinarily narrow view of resilience, one as likely to worsen conditions for human and other animals as it is to improve it: grafting principles of ecology onto the Manichean shell of colonialism, it legitimates the destruction of those populations deemed to be liabilities to the resilience of the neoliberal world 'system', in the process smoothing the pathway to reverberating catastrophe.

So while I share Fortun's sense that we need to gauge virtue in terms of resilience, it is important always to think about context, to ask, as Daniel Coleman puts it when we talk about resilience 'of whom/what or for whom/what?' Discourses of science, medicine and law are vital in asking these questions but so is literature, particularly postcolonial literature, which has always understood resilience politically, in terms of a redistribution of the material and the sensible.

## NOTES

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- <sup>2</sup> A forest ecosystem, for example, comprises multiple scales: the cellular level of a leaf, a tree, a stand of trees, and a forest each exists in reciprocal relation to the logging industry and other human and non-human networks.
- <sup>3</sup> See Ashcroft for a useful discussion of the centrality of transformation to postcolonial cultures which flourish through a combination of conservation, resistance and becoming.
- <sup>4</sup> The affiliation of love and politics has been extensively articulated by Alain Badiou. See also Davis & Sarlin's interview with Berlant and Hardt for a discussion of the different ways recent critical theory mobilises love in the name of revolutionary justice.
- <sup>5</sup> I have discussed the use of resilience within neoliberal discourse in more detail elsewhere (See O'Brien). See also Walker and Cooper.

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