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REVIEW

The Apocalypse We Become

Martin Savransky

Review of Stephanie Wakefield, *Miami in the Anthropocene: Rising Seas and Urban Resilience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2025).

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Maurice Blanchot (1997: 101) already said it sixty years ago: 'the apocalypse is disappointing'. Turning everything inside out, announcing the end of it all, the upheaval the apocalypse discloses means that 'either Man will disappear or he will transform itself.' The year was 1964. The apocalypse in question was the horizon raised by the atomic bomb—the irrevocable future opened by the fact that humanity had created the technical conditions of its own destruction. The occasion was Blanchot's discussion—Blanchot's review—of Karl Jaspers's (1963) *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Man,* whose central thrust was precisely to call for a radical transformation of human existence in the face of nuclear apocalypse. And yet, for Blanchot, the apocalypse disappoints. And it disappoints because in Jaspers's apocalyptic call for change 'nothing has changed—neither in the language, nor in the thinking, nor in the political formulations that are maintained and even drawn more tightly around the biases of a lifetime, some of them very noble, others very narrow-minded' (Blanchot 1997: 102). Blanchot's remarks were scathing. But he was not, despite appearances, aiming for Jaspers's head. Nor did he make the book (entirely) responsible for the disappointment it nevertheless engendered. Instead, he was gripped by what this apocalyptic paradox itself discloses: 'why does a question so serious', Blanchot (1997: 103) asks, 'a question such that to answer it would suppose radically new thinking, why does it not renew the language that conveys it…? Is it because the question is too grave, to the point of indiscretion, and that thinking turns immediately away from it to call for help?' Or is it 'because the question only serves as an alibi or a means of pressure for bringing us to spiritual or political decisions that have already been formulated long ago and independently of it?'

The year is now 2025. And while the shadow of nuclear armageddon has never threatened to go away, the apocalypse that now most widely captures the imagination of our age is given in the geohistorical upheaval and socioenvironmental unravelling that is the advent of climate change. It is given in the planetary disarray that pushes the earth out of its near 11,000-year-long period of relative stability and justifies the term 'Anthropocene' as this age's 'proper' name, heralding, once again, Humanity's extinction to come (or at least the frailty of the liberal image and order of both the Human and the World). Yet the apocalypse never fails to disappoint. Indeed, if Blanchot's questions are worth recalling it is because they are arguably amongst the questions quietly but powerfully murmuring through Stephanie Wakefield's (2024) unflinchingly speculative and fiercely heterodox second book, *Miami in the Anthropocene: Rising Seas and Urban Resilience.* Since the 2010s, Miami's historical image of tropical sun-kissed beaches and glamorous neon-bathed nights has become tangled in the popular and techno-political imagination with the apocalyptic image of a modern Atlantis soon to be swallowed by the seas, a metropolitan experiment in climate inhabitation. Approaching it as the very capital of the Anthropocene—at once climate change ground zero, Wall Street South, 'the United States' "capital of cool"', and living laboratory of urban climate adaptation—Wakefield's deceptively straight-laced book critically explores the social, technical, environmental and imaginal transformations involved in simultaneously adapting Miami's urban infrastructures to the overwhelming floods, saltwater contamination, and ever-more-frequent hurricanes of a planetary age while ensuring nothing truly vital about the liberal way of life and capitalist order of value—real estate markets, tourism, investment, credit ratings—has to change.

As Wakefield shows us, propping up such a world in the face of an earth at loose ends with itself requires a transformation of the modalities of governing and their forms of operation. Far from business-as-usual governmental modalities of command and control, it entails quite extraordinary feats of imagination, embracing the inevitability of climate disruption all the better to administer it, thereby approaching the city as a testing ground for 'new, untried solutions at a grand scale within unprecedented conditions'. Thus, if Miami becomes the fulcrum for thinking urban life in the

University of Bath, UK
ms4431@bath.ac.uk

planetary mess that is the present tense, 'resilience' is the name for the assemblage—at once technical, political, and imaginal—entrusted with making apocalypse endlessly disappointing, with sustaining the promise of the end's perpetual deferral, with making the Anthropocene liberalism's very own operating space. From projects to elevate streets and build new seawalls to protect urban infrastructure and property from flooding coming from the Biscayne Bay, through the efforts to harness social life *as* infrastructure of preparedness that subtend and augment existing governmental initiatives and entities, to restoration projects that seek to draw the Everglades wetlands into Miami's urban space of operation for the purposes of countervailing the flows of saltwater contaminating freshwater supplies, Wakefield incisively demonstrates that resilience imaginaries and projects of remodulating cities and urban spaces so as to ward off the apocalypse are, at one and the same time, fundamentally experimental and experimentally conservative. For 'what is therefore secured in these experiments—which both utilise, respond to, and indeed reject apocalyptic discourse that states there is no alternative—is the infrastructural, political, economic, and imaginal safe operating space for a historically specific, valued way of life–and a resilient image of the city' (2024: 73). Indeed, when she provocatively goes as far as to call these resilience projects 'utopian' (35), Wakefield subtly but powerfully reminds us that utopia has never been the exclusive purview of those who dream of liberation, and that it isn't always possible, let alone self-evident, to know how to distinguish utopia from apocalypse. To recall China Miéville's (2014) haunting words, 'we *live* in utopia, it just isn't ours.'

The most original and exhilarating dimension of *Miami in the Anthropocene* is precisely to take this insight seriously. Not, that is, in order to ignore or merely recall the politics of (in)justice and uneven distribution of vulnerabilities, styles of life, and social futures that are secured in securing the resilience of Anthropocene infrastructures and their disappointing apocalypse. But to ask of our critical imaginations that they risk a more *demanding* relationship to the planetary present, that they affirm the operative fissures the present makes present in the form of a test—pushing thought and praxis out of bounds, over the guardrails, experimenting with what remains possible (and might only become perceptible) in unsafe operating space (see also Wakefield, 2020). 'What could urban planning and design become,' Wakefield (2024: 79) asks, 'if planners, designers, governments, and even developers bifurcated away from the dominant injunction to build status quo resilience and instead put their skills and energy toward carving out other, daring and transformative pathways?' This question, as the final chapters of the book make evident, has nothing rhetorical about it. For there Wakefield takes the risk of giving thought over to such radical bifurcations, pushing what currently remain but fanciful dreams of 'living with water' by architecture students or asset-hoarding billionaires to vertiginous speeds of the imagination in order to go there where resilience thinking doesn't dare to tread: to reimagine an autonomous, popular, experimental praxis of islandisation in the Anthropocene, delinking from the tentacles of planetary urbanisation, collectively *unplanning* Miami in and as a project of 'extreme and profound urban transformation, via the audacious terraforming of whole new aqua-urban living spaces, by and for the people living in them' (2024: 164).

At stake, in the end, is neither resisting the apocalypse nor succumbing to *The End.* It is not a matter of embracing damnation or pleading for salvation. At stake in *Miami in the Anthropocene* is the affirmation that much worse than facing the Anthropocene as *end* is having to go on facing its ongoing and perpetual disappointment, the permanent infrastructural transformation and sadistic politics of survival that subtend the promise of an endless reproduction of the same. Which is to say that what this passionate book calls for is for us to utopia as hard as we can, not despite but from the radical urban upheaval the Anthropocene has wrought, even when there doesn't seem to be any plausible path for a utopia to come (Savransky, 2025). 'Is it possible,' asks Wakefield (2014: 166) this time passing on the baton, 'to imagine emancipatory trajectories of delinking [...] taking shape at a comparative scale and depth of power to those of the planet's ruling classes? Will the epoch be marked by a widespread movement of peoples delinking from toxic, dehumanizing structures to create other, rich, unbounded territories, ones infrastructurally and subjectively capable of deciding how to live on their own terms?' Refusing the soothing comforts of now consensual forms of Anthropocenic thinking that prescribe anthropic repentance and eco-piety in the face of what 'we' are supposed to have done, such a question and call entails the demanding task—one that requires the most unbridled practices of speculation, imagination, and experimentation—of approaching apocalypse neither with glee nor with suspicion or remorse but with the determination required by what is an irreversible transition out of the world we have inherited and into a world fundamentally unknown: where nothing has quite ended, since nothing has quite begun, but everything is radically transformed (Savransky, 2024). It invites us, in other words, to dare say *yes* to the risk and possibility of pushing beyond the resilient forces of apocalyptic disappointment in order to live up to the apocalypse we (could) become.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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