



Broken Futures: Climate Change and Capitalism in Select Fiction

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Climate change is a comprehensive and uncertain phenomenon. The disturbances and convulsions of climate change increasingly touch every aspect of our lives, disturbing our social relations and bleeding into our psyches by demanding we recognize the cost of our privilege. There have been a number of works dealing with environmental issues since *The Drowned World* by J.G. Ballard and *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson. Climate fiction has emerged as a new genre and brings climate change and its effects from the background to the fore, highlights the specific problem of human-made global warming and its effects thereof. The climate emergency demands us to think about our responsibilities on a global scale rather than as individuals, and forces us to think about our effects not just on fellow humans but on all the species that call this planet home. This is where literature can provide us with a headspace to think through this difficult and pressing problem. Scholars of Environmental communication and environmental psychology have argued that the arts can play a critical role in influencing beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors related to climate change. Corbett and Clark argue that the arts allow “the so-called invisibility of climate change to be seen, felt, and imagined in the present and the future” and “encourage critical reflection on existing social structures and cultural and moral norms” (Corbett & Clark, 2017).

Public discussions about climate change have been dominated by issues of evidence, representation, and belief. The processes underpinning public perceptions of climate change have been extensively documented in academic histories; in popular science and alternative media.

Human impact on the environment has shaped the current epoch into what many call “The Anthropocene” an age which started “when human effects on the environment became so great that they registered in the geological record” (Emmett and Nye 16).

The term Anthropocene may help us to move beyond the narrow questions of truth and falsity with regard to climate science. The framework of “Anthropocene” helpfully moves beyond the dead-end debate that has dominated Environmental Politics till now. Anthropocene indicates that atmospheric warming is not merely a theory, but a phenomenon that has already been measured and verified across scientific disciplines and conclusively linked to human emissions of fossil fuels. Thus, Anthropocene productively shifts the emphasis from individual thoughts, beliefs, and choices to a human process that has occurred across distinct social groups, countries, economies, and

generations: the wholesale emission of fossil fuels that began in the Victorian period and has intensified through the present day. By using the term “Anthropogenic” change, this paper takes the firm position that climate change is upon us.

In his book *The Great Derangement* (2016) Amitav Ghosh bemoans “The Climate crisis casts a much smaller shadow on literary fiction than it does on the world”. A few years later, this does not seem to be the case as public awareness of climate change has grown, there has been a surge of novels dealing with the same. Climate literature has been effective at capacitating readers to imagine potential futures and consider the fragility of human societies. But, most of the works that have been written till now in regards to the climate crisis at hand, are either too apocalyptic in style or are non-fictional works based on hard facts. The problem with nonfictional accounts as research has shown is that they are unable to engage the readers. Telling people that they are threatened is entirely different from people feeling they are threatened. This is in part why the climate rhetoric has failed, because telling a person that something hurts when it doesn't feel like it won't work.

In order for people to change behavior, people must not be told how bad it will be or even how bad it is. They must experience or sense it for themselves. This is where fiction can play an important role. Narrative persuasion entails embedding a persuasive message within a story that has both a plot and identifiable characters (Kreuter et al., 2007). A growing body of research indicates that narrative story-telling is an effective mode of communicating persuasive messages. On the other hand, research has shown that the apocalyptic narratives are not useful, they are actually harmful. Portraying far-fetched scenarios can be irresponsible because then when people actually hear a realistic climate prediction they may think, “that this is not too bad”. In fact, reading about the prospective cataclysmic effects of climate change can make people feel fatalistic and paralyzed.

What we need is a form of literary expression that lifts, “Climate Crisis” out of the realm of intellectual knowledge and lodges it deep in the readers. The most important task that we need fiction writers to do is to tell the readers how the future is going to viscerally surround them.

More than actual accuracy of details, the readers need to feel what it is to live in a world crumbling gradually around them. Further, most of these narratives have failed to engage with reasons as to why the environment is in a state of deterioration today. Not much emphasis in fiction has been laid on the economic system of capitalism that is inextricably entwined with the climate catastrophe that is upon us today. While capitalism has produced a plethora of socioeconomic benefits over its relatively brief history, it has also instigated unforeseen and undesirable consequences. The extraction and consumption of immense natural resources has generated a correspondingly monstrous amount of waste in the form of physical garbage, atmospheric pollution and other forms of environmental degradation.

For more than five decades we have known that human activities are leading to a global increase in temperature. Yet, society has not been able to change its course because the changes required to avert catastrophe and to make the distribution of resources equitable, threaten the economic interests of an elite minority. The capitalist system, as it currently stands, is neither designed for nor capable of consciously inhibiting its own propensity for unsustainable growth. As Naomi Klein remarked, "Climate change is a civilizational wake-up call. A powerful message—spoken

in the language of fires, floods, droughts, and extinctions—telling us that we need an entirely new economic model and a new way of sharing this planet."

There was never a time, when the forces of weather and geology did not have a bearing on our lives but neither has there been a time when they have pressed themselves on us with such relentless directness. Sea level rise, desertification, and increased extreme weather events are predicaments of the present not of some impending future. We have entered as Timothy Morton says, "The age of Hyperobjects". Global warming is perhaps the most dramatic example of "Hyperobjects"—entities of such vast temporal and spatial dimensions that they defeat traditional ideas about what a thing is in the first place. Such objects put unbearable strains on our normal ways of reasoning. Insisting that we have to reinvent how we even begin to comprehend the world we now inhabit. Climate change has reversed the temporal order of modernity: those on the margins are now the first to experience the future that awaits all of us; it is they who confront most directly what Thoreau called 'vast, titanic, inhuman nature'.

Science doesn't tell us what to do," Kingsolver wrote in *Flight Behavior*". It only tells us what is, but fiction can play an active role in spreading awareness, constructing settings and environmental events in order to socialize readers into ways of being and behaving. The road to a greener tomorrow might just require us to re-evaluate our relationship with this planet.

II

Early in *New York 2140*, two boys jump into their inflatable boat to begin the day's business, scavenging through the canals of a half-drowned New York, since the weight of the engine threatens to sink the boat, the older boy sits up front to balance it out. Much of Kim Stanley Robinson's significant body of work is built on small moments like these; beneath the vast scope of his futurist landscapes is a fascination with the everyday rhythms of life. A coastal level rise of 50 feet has submerged most of New York city reshaping physical geography and the civic ecosystem but Robinson still tries and succeeds to make it feel like home. It's a story that expects to be relevant sooner than later, and it reminds us that we can rarely see bubbles when we are in them. *New York 2140* isn't a novel that cares to be subtle; it just wants its large-scale implications to feel uncomfortably close to home. This paper analyses how this novel is a good example of the inextricable connection between climate change and the economic system of capitalism. It portrays a diverse group of characters slowly realizing that the relentless capitalist system is jeopardizing their lives. Not only can they see the problems in the ongoing economic framework they can also visualize ways in which the system could be mended to include more people and save lives.

While ecocriticism has vastly found expressions through its interdisciplinary nature such as ecofeminism, environmental justice, queer ecology, and thing theory (to name a few), this thesis focuses more specifically on "Social Ecology". Social Ecology "envisions a world in which basic human needs are fulfilled through an economic restructuring that is environmentally sustainable" (Merchant Radical 153), which ultimately summarizes the objective of reforming capitalism that encompasses the main conflict of *New York 2140*. Furthermore, as an

extension of social ecology, “cultural ecology” becomes key to understand the critique of cultural behavior in the novel as it “considers the sphere of human culture not as a separate entity but as interdependent with ecological processes”.

New York 2140 as a novel engages with the complex issue of climate change at multiple levels, in ways that previous works have failed to. The work through its story and characters brings light upon the problematic perspective towards nature, that assumes, that humans are right to exploit nature since it is just fuel for a bigger purpose such as capitalist expansion. Nature being reduced to a passive role or rather this (assumed) death of nature is aided by a capitalist mentality that, as Vandana Shiva states, offers homogeneous, simplistic, and exploitative view of the world, which humans continue prolonging today. A character in the work sums up the situation quite articulately, “We have been paying a fraction of what things really cost to make, but meanwhile the planet, and the workers who made the stuff, take the unpaid costs right in the teeth”. Since capitalism has behaved with such ambition towards incessant growth ever since the scientific revolution, it should come as no surprise that Robinson devices his novel in the year 2140 as the product of perpetuating that capitalist system with nonstop violations of ecological balance. In other words, human beings are not merely observers; they are an active part of nature. Therefore, the Anthropocene stands for an era where not only is there an awareness of humans’ impact on earth but also, an ecological consciousness is being re-evaluated, and works like *New York 2140* have the potential to cause a shift in cultural behavior, to reconnect to a meaningful ecology.

Robinson’s *New York 2140* has been regarded as a “sustained critique of capitalism” to borrow words from Joshua Rothman, writing in *The New York Times*. According to Rothman by portraying denizens as dislocated by climate change, the novel “blames global warming on financiers, and on a market system that consistently underestimates the environmental costs of economic growth”. The major point of departure for Robinson’s novel from the other pieces on climate situation lies in the fact that the book feels like the most optimistic take on our future yet. Sure, he claims that the water levels will rise and the Earth will go through a mass extinction event the likes of which we have never seen before, but when things really go bad, society, he seems to suggest can still manage to survive. The New York of 2140 is the new Venice, with canals replacing streets, people going about their lives even in the face of progressively being drowned by climate change, continue to justify their dwelling in the city. Robinson constructs a world with a multitude of characters, all of whom come together around Manhattan’s MetLife Tower which they all inhabit. There’s Mutt and Jeff, a pair of programmers who are kidnapped after they unleash a bug in the financial markets, while Inspector Gen, an imposing and well-connected officer is looking into their disappearance. Franklin is a hedge fund manager, making a good living betting on the housing bubble in drowned coastlines. There is an enthusiastic blogger named Amelia who travels the world in an airship, documenting the fragile nature of world’s biosphere and two boys trying to get their hands on a sunken treasure.

The city is a character in its own right, it feels completely real with its details and vibrance adapted to water life: buildings have garages for boats, waterproofing measures, while people walk overhead in skywalks which connect

one building to another. If we look at it from another perspective, it feels that the “modernization” of the city blurs the climate crisis for the people of this novel, even when that crisis engulfs their everyday life. Essentially, it seems that the city itself backgrounds how urgent it is to adequately respond to climate change, while temporary technological fixes halt the citizens from recognizing that immediate action is necessary.

The MetLife building specifically becomes essential to demonstrate the violations to residents lives through the threats of privatization and environmental degradation. Herein, place connectedness is crucial in unifying or working as a ‘galvanizing force’ since “the more a site feels like a place, the more fervently it is so cherished, the greater the potential concern at its violation or even the possibility of violation” (Buell Writing 56). Thus, this analysis naturally leads to answering the following three further questions: “What are violations that these New Yorkers experience?” How do these New Yorkers react to such endangerment?” What frames such reactions? The major voice that articulates answers to these questions is Charlotte. An increasingly prominent worker for the Householder’s Union, Charlotte, exhibits the highest communal commitment in *New York 2140*. Being both an advocate for immigrants and refugees and being the chair of the building board, Charlotte moves back and forth from the public affairs of the whole city to those within the MetLife only. With her administrative role and leadership, her character spans between the city and a larger community allowing readers to see the interconnectedness of an unjust system that is proliferating social inequalities increasingly augmented by the changes in climate. This is where I feel *New York 2140* is at its best, giving the readers a glimpse of how climate crisis will not just wreak havoc on human lives but also how the economic structure of capitalism today in its current state will bank on this crisis and lead to a further increase in economic inequality. This divide is underlined throughout the novel, for example there is this small portion of the population comprised of the aristocrats of New York City, who are not affected by the climate catastrophe in the slightest since they can afford to live in upper-side residences, rather they make money out of the situation. The crisis in all its ugliness is suffered by the ordinary people, the proletariat.

Along this same line of thought, we see *New York 2140* consistently criticizes capitalism for disregarding the degradation of the environment when a great majority is being directly affected, and only a few are safe in their private, dry, and impervious buildings. This minority of privileged individuals is constantly growing more elitist since the floods have also caused social hierarchies to be more marked. “Depressed people did not usually engage in criminal conspiracies” says Vlade, which embodies the theme of the book that the working class is so busy surviving that they do not have time to protest the government or the finance industry, again emphasizing the divide between the rich and the poor.

The novel also talks about immigration and how climate change will lead to massive amounts of involuntary population movements. One character works in immigration law, while many others are migrants themselves. By the end of the novel even more people become homeless. Ultimately, that may be one of the teachings of the novel: the insignificance of systemic hierarchies upon environmental crisis. Simply put, it does not matter what race or

nationality the affected ones are, climate change is a phenomenon that menaces to drown everyone indiscriminately and only the empowered ones will remain until the last minute.

There is a sense of community that runs through the novel. This 'sense' is sometimes a result of the individual circumstances of the characters, but mostly it is due to the gargantuan shadow of climate change and how it seeps into their lives. I hypothesize that this sense of community aids the characters to reform capitalism. Threats of privatization and environmental degradation, the growing economic inequality, the gradual realization of the characters in the novel that if anything is to change then it will change through collective action. All of this motivates the citizens to initiate a revolt which, despite being unsuccessful, does unite them all under the common reality of being victims of the capitalist system. It also motivates Charlotte to run for congressional office, the ultimate commitment of community to create such a reform.

Robinson alludes to the ancestry and prevailing dominance of capitalism through the Citizen's assertion that no one, not even bankers, fully comprehends the system: "It grew in the dark, it's a stack, a Hyperobject, an accidental megastructure. No single individual can know any one of these megastructures, much less the mega-megastructure that is the global economic system, the system of all systems" (301). In other words, we infer that capitalism is such an old system, such a massively developed and spread-out entity, an almost unstoppable juggernaut that imagining, even conceiving a new model that supersedes it is nearly impossible. Robinson's *New York 2140* criticizes capitalism in a unique and unparalleled way. Rather, than proposing the eradication of this ideology, it aims at a reformation through radical ecology. Fiction has played a massive role in bringing the issues of climate change to the forefront of social consciousness and it can help us conceive alternate modes of thinking, living and governance to tackle the same. In the end I would like to quote Robinson himself saying, "When it comes to the environment, the invisible hand never picks up the check."

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