

Climate Realism, Capitalist and Otherwise

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What I like about *New York 2140* is that it describes something that could happen in the real world. The mechanisms are in place. Congress could make the laws and the president could enact them. It's not grossly dissimilar to what Bernie Sanders was advocating during his campaign.

—Kim Stanley Robinson

An estimated 2 billion people worldwide are currently living on land that will, in just 30 years, be either well below the high-tide line or uninhabitably hot, or both. A teensy fraction of the earth's population has lethally carbonized the atmosphere at a rapidly accelerating rate over the past couple of decades, in inverse proportion to the availability of irrefutable scientific evidence, and, in the U.S. at least, coinciding exactly with the revolutionary repeal of taxation for the wealthy. Just 8 individuals possess as much wealth as half of humanity; half of all carbon emissions originate from just 10% of the species consuming the products of just 25 corporations, and 90% of all emissions come from the rich half of the world (meaning the poor half emits almost nothing).¹ The limitless quest for monetary wealth daily intensifies emissions, and resultant rising atmosphere temperatures precipitate greater humidity over the world's oceans, which must be discharged as rain and snow, and which melts glaciers and polar ice caps, all netting severe water accumulations – call it a liquidity trap.

This lethal solubilization of capital flow and aquatic torrent outfits the central premise of the unabashedly big, boldly retro 2017 novel from the bestselling sci-fi great Dr. Kim Stanley Robinson, *New York 2140*. In the novel, flooding rivers, rising oceans, and melting glaciers in our present crest in this near future in two awesome "pulses" of 10 feet and 40 feet, engulfing all planetary coastal areas, killing millions and displacing millions more. The ever aberrant island of Manhattan, capital of capital, partially persists, everything below 30th Street gone, the uber-rich migrated far north past 190th to The Cloisters, and a risky fresh investment bubble frothing in the

intertidal terrain between 30th and 40th.² The more things change, the more they stay the same - as the omniscient narration that synthesizes multiple focalized characters straight-relays Forbes Mag facts, “the four hundred richest people on the planet own half the planet’s wealth, and the top one percent own fully eighty percent of the world’s wealth.”³ Polarized accumulation, mass displacement, water emergencies, private security, and real estate hedges: the future in 2140 rings alarmingly undistant from the present in 2019. *New York 2140* presents the perpetuity of financial capitalism *even after climate Armageddon* - a wholly apparent failure of speculative fictionalizing that evokes the specter of “capitalist realism.”

Ten years ago this fall, Mark Fisher defined “capitalist realism” as “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it.” This perilous imagination deficit has frequently been synonymized with the Jamesonian/Žižekian ubiquitous adage “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.” *New York 2140* presents itself as a consummate capitalist realist aesthetic, since the fundamental premise of its made world is capitalism’s permanence: calamitous dissolution of life on Earth has left financial speculation and human resource extraction intact. This is something of a conundrum to behold in a text written by a Fredric Jameson doctoral advisee with nearly two dozen speculative and science fictions on his vita, a text so brimming with Marxist bromides as to rank high on the list of recent “theory novels.”⁴ Yet this novel instantiates capitalist realism as plot and setting in order to mediate it, rendering it thinkable as the style of a drowned world from which it remains possible to take distance. The chief technique of this mediation is the production of a disparity between capitalist realist style and capitalist realist attitude: 2140 is still capitalism, but everybody’s having a good time.

Part of what opens this gulch is the ambiguity between style and attitude in the discourse around capitalist realism. Fisher analogizes it explicitly to “socialist realism,” the official aesthetic of the Soviet Union, but then debuts less an aesthetic category than an affective disposition: a pervasive mood of nonoptimism, an unimaginativeness ultimately deadly - including for him. The few aesthetic examples he takes for touchstones of this sensibility - films like Alfonso Cuarón’s *Children of Men* and literature like Franz Kafka’s *The Trial* - hardly exemplify the mode that we would ordinarily call “realism”; instead they give texture to the dispirited, dystopian ethos Fisher appropriates “realism” to name: “the deflationary perspective of a depressive who believes that any positive state, any hope, is a dangerous illusion.” Realism for Fisher is less a mode than a mood.

Mode has nevertheless intrigued Fisher’s readers. In his lights we find, for example, frequent observations that the ruinous system and its intransigent ideology have birthed a superabundance in 21st century cultural production of apocalypse scenarios that highlight the ease with which popular media like cinema and television showcase new ice ages, human reproductive menopause, nuclear armageddon, and

alien colonization.⁵ Disaster porn as the house style of capitalist realism – but indeed, a style with little of the affective tenor of Fisher’s original conceit, since these products so boundingly enthuse destruction, and mostly conclude with superhero exhortations like “Now let’s rebuild!”⁶ On another channel, critics have affirmed that realism is “the aesthetic mode most intimate to capitalism” and tracked a resurgence of high realist style in visual and literary culture since the 2008 global economic crisis.⁷ The features of this style they delineate as “omniscient narration” as well as “its mimetic and documentary registers, its assumptions about actuality, its aspirations to social totality, its uneasy rivalry with allegory, its strategies of surveillance, spectatorship, and ethnographic ‘othering’” (14), and they associate the return of these features (as well as ironization of them) with a project “to capture the real.”⁸ To the extent that this return of realism is accorded epistemic privilege in “capturing” realities so as to foster critical consciousness, capitalist realism comes to look not at all like a depression, and much more like sociology.

Arguably a strange union of both of these varieties of capitalist realism – the apocalyptic and the banal, the end of the world and an undead aesthetic – impels *New York 2140*, since it represents horrific capitalist longevity in long-ago passé literary realism. But crucially the book severs capitalist realist mode from capitalist realist mood, since it trades depression for ebullience apres le deluge. *Business Insider* calls it “surprisingly fun!”⁹ Activating Austenian irony and Dickensian omniscience and Melvillean hyperbole in a 634 page situation comedy of immortal capitalism after legion death, *New York 2140* disrupts capitalist realist affect while accepting its world-trappings; it mediates capitalist realism as world-structuration rather than world-regard. The novel thus ventilates the suffocating totalizations of capitalist realist depression with new winds of political will, denaturalizing the very medium of ecocide, atmosphere itself.

Opening breathing room in this way for a realpolitik of can-do coping amidst capitalist carnage, the novel ends rather happily. After yet another murderous and largely unpredictable superhurricane, a modest social democratic project is tentatively led by an upstart redistributionist congresswoman from the block, AOC avant la lettre: “finance was now for the most part a privately operated public utility”¹⁰ and all the greatest hits of the welfare state in late capitalism come back on the table: “universal health care, free public education through college, a living wage, guaranteed full employment, a year of mandatory national service,” and, best of all, “bull markets appeared all over the planet.” Jubilant in its market-based finance capitalism with state regulation, the last section of the narrative concludes “there are no happy endings! Because there are no endings!” Easy to see how SF Gate, indie newsletter of the carbon hotbed, pronounced “One reaches the end of *New York 2140* with a smile and at least the momentary belief that the future might work out after all.”¹¹

Enthusing the insufficiently radical, tragically too late retooling of finance

capitalism for the common good, *New York 2140* explicitly anticipates what has very recently come to be known as The Green New Deal, the winkingly old-fashioned big state production of public works projects for decarbonization that is humanity's only hope for a less worse eco-collapse. It is not enough, it is too late - but these are all the more reasons for it. Robinson directly identified the early drafts of this policy as his impetus for the specific aesthetic of his book. In a lecture he titled simply "Science Fiction is the Realism of Our Time" (a mantra he continues to repeat) he proclaims: "What I like about *New York 2140* is that it describes something that could happen in the real world. The mechanisms are in place. Congress could make the laws and the president could enact them. It's not grossly dissimilar to what Bernie Sanders was advocating during his campaign." In making this "not gross dissimilarity" into an aesthetic - a flagrantly outmoded high realist style bounding from character to character, past to present, interior to exterior, focalization and relativization as only omniscient fiction can - Robinson maneuvers too-late realist form to dislodge too-late realist resignation. *New York 2140*'s atmospheric effervescence counters "left melancholy" rousing imagination from its crypt.¹² Too late, but still.

Too Late Realism

Mapping capitalist realism as style in a book whose spine proclaims itself "Science Fiction" requires crossing the terrain where science fiction ends and realism begins. Realism famously thwarts modal definitions, but we might usefully in this context point to the consistent tendency to understand it as the "not genre," at once the consummation of the novel's sublation of fixed genre hierarchies, and the diffuse background against which the sharper contours of melodrama, the gothic, detection, romance, and science fiction come in to relief. Perhaps more usefully, especially where science fiction is at issue, it seems important to mark that realism commits to worldbuilding, constructing internally consistent social matrices balancing psychic depth and societal breadth, detailed environments and persons-qua-characters; that it usually but not exclusively focuses on temporal contexts rather proximate to its time of writing; and that it exhibits lots of inquisitive energy about knowability, empiricism, probability, often by blending omniscience or impersonality with irony or avowed limitation.¹³ Compared to science fiction, realism generally adheres to constraints of finitude, mortality, and the time-space continuum, and this thinking within constraint has often been regarded, especially by critics of Foucauldian stripes, as highly *normative* - codifying liberalism, reifying referentiality, and totalizing relationality.¹⁴ As against this, Marxist critics emphasize realism's project to activate totality as a point of view rather than a content, and to speculatively probe social possibility.¹⁵ Distinguishing realism from science fiction therefore depends in large part on which conceit of realism is the point of departure; by some conceits, the two are quite close after all.

"Science fiction is the realism of our time" denominates this closeness while

underlining the strangeness of our time. As a proposition, it means something like a historical event of the two modes switching places: there was a realism, in its time, which performed the Lukácsian function of “thinking in terms of totality,” while there is now some new time, our time, which assigns that office to science fiction instead.¹⁶ What accounts for the difference between that time and our time, the 19th century and now, is that c19 extractive capitalism merely started what the c21 is aggressively finishing, the end of earth. Science Fiction is then the theory of totality for a world whose “transcendental homelessness” (again to invoke Lukács) is not spiritual but *material*.¹⁷ “Science Fiction is the realism of our time” means as well that the two fuse: the aesthetic difference between a mode of speculative world building that embraces constraints and a mode of speculative world building that defies them has become untenable now that the political and environmental constraints are too real. Realism, too, is speculative, precisely in its embrace of constraint, in its willingness to think what is to be done when it is too late. Stuck inside the capitalist realist world of carboniferous catastrophe, the conditions of possibility for fiction for mutate. What many critics have been celebrating as an elevation of genre fiction - a new ambition, new legitimacy, and new market of zombies, fantasy, romance, dungeons and dragons - looks, in *New York 2140* like its opposite, a deflation of genre, a diminution of science fiction to realism.¹⁸

Jameson’s studies of science fiction track precisely this diminution. Where Darko Suvin influentially defines science fiction as “a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment,”¹⁹ Jameson has observed this estrangement is more regularly a question of “when” rather than “where,” because the decline of the historical novel (1848 or 1862, depending on who’s counting) almost perfectly coincides with the advent of science fiction in Jules Verne (1863), which distinguishes itself from the former with its “nascent sense of the future” and which generally projects a future history that contrasts with high realism’s presentism or middle distance.²⁰ Whether temporal or spatial, Jameson has also lamented this gap’s recent collapse: the constitutive speculative distance of science fictions is “plagued by the perpetual reversion of difference and otherness into the same, and the discovery that our most energetic imaginative leaps into radial alternatives were little more than the projections of our own social moment and historical or subjective situation.”²¹ If the difference between realism and science fiction might therefore not be about estranged content, Samuel Delany preserves the possibility that it inheres in estranged form, though he fascinatingly flips the script, making realism weirder than science fiction: whereas a sentence like “then her world exploded” can, in science fiction, literally refer to phenomenal combustion and through such “literalization” radically open the dimensions in which such a literalism would be possible, “mundane” realism “constrains us to read such a string of words as...muzzy metaphor.”²² Science Fiction

is estranged but literal; realism is mundane but metaphorical, and their difference hinges on how much is practicably possible in the environment as it is. Realism then names constriction of the environment - only some things can be literal - and the too real carbonization of the earth's atmosphere in too late capitalism seals its generic inevitability.

Environmental closure as a property of realism is underexamined in a recent vexed intervention into this question of the separable provinces of realism and science fiction that turns precisely on climate. The novelist Amitav Ghosh contends that realism is incapable, generically, of representing climate change, since "global warming defies... common sense...events of this time have a very high degree of improbability," and realism must remain tethered to banality and probability, foreclosing extremity, volatility, and the sublime magnitude of geologic intervention.²³ Fictions which do accommodate the erratic poles of catastrophe are "those generic out-houses...fantasy, horror, and science fiction."²⁴ Science fiction's generic extremity equips it to directly present environmental collapse. But despite his thorough anatomy of realism's limitedness, Ghosh still considers the production of realist fiction to be an aesthetically valuable moral enterprise (he himself, after all, writes sweeping historical novels) so he appeals to what he understands as its mimetic imperative, calling for novelists to focus their realist gaze on the experiences of a ruined ecosphere. Realism with the right politics, he would have it, can modernize the "out-house" of science fiction. Since numerous critics have shown the manifold ways that realist fictions explore such climate-pertinent concepts as time scales, extraction economies, infrastructure, and human species being, it seems shortsighted of Ghosh, or anyone else, to confine its mediating faculties to immediate iteration or literal hurricanes.²⁵ Exhibit A, *New York 2140* precisely constructs a climate realism beyond calamity mimesis, since it performs too late old school realism - omniscience, social breadth and psychic depth, thinking in terms of totality, the resonance or dissonance between narration and plot, conceding the enabling limits of temporal finitude and practical physics, institutional and infrastructural imaginary, presentist scope - to suss out the potentiality within the too late.

Fucking New York

The title instantly forecasts the play of familiarity and distance that comprises the book's capitalist realist submerging of science fiction. Temporally dislocated because 120ish years in the future, the novel would seem to meet the "future history" criterion, though its frequent present tense and timeless capitalism undermines this, and its decidedly not spatially dislocated: unlike many of Robinson's previous novels, it is wholly set on planet Earth. Not much geographic dislocation in the quest for the great American novel, not much cartographing of a foreign land in pursuit of a new topos, whether utopian or dys-. And more: the novel's world is deeply familiar, that most typical of fictional cities: New York City, storied epicenter of American empire,

engorged with the daily grind of getting by and the prodigious grime as its byproducts, exuberant in glittering skyline sunsets and meat cart grease stains on the lapels of the 0.1% confirming how much all of us indeed share with the temporarily embarrassed millionaires. This center of it all, this key to American mythologies, this financial district for the globe, this Iroquois home, discovered by Italians, claimed by Dutch, conquered by English, remains, after profound reshaping of the world's coasts and severe adjustment of the world's population, magically utmost. Realism's canonical commitment to contemporary time and real physical space seemingly applies; very little is estranged in the space and time depicted in *New York 2140*: even a flooded New York is still, the book indelibly inscribes in its last sentence, "Fucking New York," institutional democracy continues apace, and financial capitalism propelled by real estate derivatives remains in full force. The citizens of NYC are brash and brusque as ever, busy making a buck, guzzling traffic slapstick, hating on dimwit tourists - but discerning eyes may catch the occasional glint of communal goodwill between shoving elbows. Capitalism is eternal, and so is that New York state of mind.

New York attitude abides, but this book channels less the psychic states of its characters than their relentless action; there is no time for capitalist realist depression amid all the busyness. High realism's paradigmatic banality fills these pages. Rather than offering sweeping panoramas of the estranged setting or encyclopedic gazettes of futuristic technology, the book is intensely plot-driven. A polyfocal narrative, *New York 2140* covers 7 different characters or character-pairs. Franklin is a hedge bro, Gen is a high-ranking policewoman, Amelia is youtube star turned animal conservator, Charlotte is a civil servant, Vlade is a building super; and in the pairs, Mutt & Jeff are quants working for trading firms, while Stefan & Roberto are evidently homeless canal kids. (Note that 3 of the 7 characters come from the financial sector.) Each foci is involved in its own plot, that majority of which are wholly independent of climate catastrophe: Mutt & Jeff are kidnapped, Stefan & Roberto hunt treasure, Amelia assists animal migrations, Franklin plays the market, Inspector Gen keeps law and order, Charlotte civilly serves, Vlade maintains. Even the most adventurous of these (the kidnapping, the gold prospecting, and the polar relocating) belong to ordinary capitalist processes of appropriation, displacement, and speculation, and the less adventurous exemplify social reproduction in law, institutions, and infrastructure. The plots derive from the foundational realist paradox, the adventures of everyday life, and the novel's scope intakes the quotidian details of social reproduction: work, consumption, commuting, communication, in the great tradition of realism. Robinson has repeatedly averred that "science fiction is the realism of our time" and in *New York 2140* his practice of realism actualizes that equation: there is virtually none of the conventional nominalism of science fiction (LeGuin: "local administrative regions, called blocks"; "they called their engines and dirigibles names like Indomitable, Endurance"; "the group called themselves The Odonian Society") and virtually none of the conventional technological exposition (indeed, the future is disturbingly un-

new in this regard, powered by AppleWatches, solar panels, and boats).²⁶ This realism concerns itself with quotidian existence – eating and sleeping, dressing and traveling, working working working. As Robinson described it in a lecture in which he situated his work in the trajectory of “Defoe, Fielding, Richardson, Austen, Dickens, Eliot,” his realism upholds the “notion that literature could be about ordinary people doing ordinary things that ordinary people did...the drama of getting by in this modernizing world.”²⁷ Where science fiction might suggest great quests, realism confines itself to the odysseys of daily busyness. Among the consciousnesses focalized, the individuals are disproportionately women (while the two couples and the one first person point of view are all men). These women work as police, government, social workers, social media influencers (and hybrids thereof) and they go about the business of maintaining law, order, domestic equilibrium, and eco-awareness with no-nonsense efficiency. Everyone is so industriously well-adjusted, grateful to savor a steak at the end of a hard day’s work.

The bustle of daily life in *New York 2140* redounds to a cheerful presumption of cooperation and kindness among strangers. If it is dismally requisite for science fiction, from Octavia Butler to Stephen King, to multiply nightmarish sequences of abject terror, perpetual violence, and chronic rape – to presuppose a hell of other people – Robinson’s conjured world utterly rejects such sociopathy. None of his protagonists are bad guys, and none of the bad guys are rashly interpersonally brutal. Malevolence percolates in corporate greed and private security firms and insider trading, but not among individuals getting by on the street, who rather embrace the cooperative spirit of housing coops, Mutual Aid (as the householder’s union is named), and collective solidarity. When the disparate plots synch, bringing the many focalized individuals and pairs together, it is at moments of support, confederation, and comradeship. In the end, in grand comedic fashion there are even two new happy couples, and a new family composite. This alone, to any seasoned reader of science fiction, furnishes a surprisingly cushy ecology, much more consistent with realism’s reputed imaginary domestic resolutions to real social contradictions than with estrangement of either utopian or dystopian stripe.

In typical realist synthetic form, the multiplot unifies in two great events: a massive storm, and a big short. The storm is so significantly unforeseen as to suggest no real advances in 120 more years of climate science, or such extreme volatility in the weather as to defy predictive modeling. Coming on swiftly, a preparatory scramble and horrific aftermath actuate the unshakeable universals of cause and effect for all the characters. This unifying plot of climate attack epitomizes a vulnerability that slightly dampens the zippy proceedings. A second unifying event is the big short the 7 improbably conceive in response to a hostile takeover bid for their building. After the adventurous Moby Dickian gold quest comes true in the middle of the book, the protagonists think collectively about how best to use the billions. In the end the radical act the novel envisions is not post-capitalism after climate disaster, nor post-

capitalism before the worst of climate disaster, but continuing capitalism long after climate disaster: it champions nothing other than a *hedge*, a master's tool from the dutch cycle of accumulation, used to trigger a nationalizing bailout of the banks into public property. The unimaginative yet demonstrably ameliorative character of this radical act recalls recent history that could have been. As Robinson himself notes, this "plot is not my personal invention. It emerges from recent history"²⁸: 2008 looms large in the novel, providing the explicit "model" for the crisis of the storm and the collective action the united protagonists pursue, as well as for the bailout of the banks that took place after both pulses.²⁹ The perpetuity in the year 2140 of the forces that caused 2008 - hyperleveraging, computer-automated high frequency trading, toxic real estate assets - instances the obscene permanence of capitalism, but simultaneously, refigures the social democracy that has so often accompanied capitalism as a life-raft: big state spending for the common good is the necessary and insufficient project now. Holding these contradictory and compromised possibilities in its jaunty, game hands, *New York 2140* cashes out realist fiction's indelible faculty for dialectics.

Met Life Perpetuity

The capitalist realist over-proximity of the plot and context, capitalism and the big apple, present and future, transpires in a setting and form that further effect too late realism. A prime concern for conventional realist detail, setting invites description of social space - of the phenomenal, inhabitable, apprehensible terrain shaping relations. *New York 2140* of course announces its setting as the greatest and most provincial city on earth, and the novel highlights the strangeness of this choice by briefly explaining that the destroyed east coast is no longer the geographic center of U.S. political economy, between Washington D.C. as official government seat and NYC as international financial one, since most administration of this kind has relocated to Denver, Colorado. In exactly zero scenes in the novel is Denver visited or detailed (nor, forfend, is any other city in the world, coastal or not), and the citizen makes sure that the reader observes this elision: "there is no need to describe the situation in other coastal cities like watery Miami, or paraonoidly poldered London and Washington D.C. or swampy Bangkok, or nearly abandoned Buenos Aires, not to mention all the inland snoozefests called out when one says the single dread word Denver."³⁰ Unrepresented snoozefest flyover states negatively present the bygone greatness and structural irrelevance of the city of New York; choosing to set the future in the past as a genius way of domesticating or provincializing the future - everything is still the same - and of showing up the silliness of the obsession with NYC in the first place. (That the author is a quintessential Californian may also shade things here.) Topologically reoriented and economically inverted, with the poor now in lower Manhattan and the rich in its far northern point, the city remains recognizably classic in its bustle and grit. And too, the recognitions encompass a strictly contemporaneous evocation

of Manhattan Stonehenge:

that glorious slant of the light, that feeling that in certain moments lances in on that tilt – that you had been thinking you were living in a room and suddenly with a view between buildings out to the rivers, a dappled sky overhead, you are struck by the fact that you live on the side of a planet – that the great city is also a great bay on a great world. In those golden moments even the most hard-bitten citizen, the most oblivious urban creature, perhaps only pausing for a WALK sign to turn green, will be pierced by that light and take a deep breath and see the place as if for the first time, and feel, briefly but deeply, what it means to live in a place so strange and so gorgeous.³¹

Within this homespun megalopolis, the setting is even more restricted and wonderfully domestic: the disparate major characters who enjoy their own focalized chapters almost all reside in one building, the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company Tower. Although much classical realism takes place in invented provinces / imaginary towns/ fictive districts, respecting the space-time continuum tends to be one of realism's features, and thus it is notable that the futuristic setting of this novel is a regular, actually existing skyscraper of an actually existing insurance company. The Met Life Tower was built in 1909, almost the exact beginning of the American cycle of accumulation, but it was architecturally modeled after the Campanile in Venice, a cathedral from the Genoese cycle of accumulation. These Venetian tones echo in the figuration of the many new canals in Manhattan and the title SuperVenice for the intertidal. While somewhat ill-fated as an original (the Campanile suffered numerous structural failures, including total collapse in 1902), the building's religious ostentation evokes the theological function of insurance, a providential logic guiding so much venture finance. The world's tallest building for its first 5 years (it was surpassed by the nearby Woolworth Building) and a distinctive highpoint of the Manhattan skyline for much of the 20th century, Met Life played up this theology in depicting itself as a lighthouse, with the slogan "the light that never fails" guiding decades of its market dominance. In another stroke of literal symbolism in the realist vein, the Met Life Tower has been owned since 2013 by the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority, consistent with increasing international capital control since the 1970's. In *New York 2140*, a hostile takeover bid, levied by a labyrinth of LLCs of almost untraceable provenance, once again makes of this Met real estate an easily transferable pseudo-liquid asset.

This archetype of international capital is also the device of New York provincialism for this novel, since everybody is a neighbor, everybody is constantly enjoying coincidental encounters with one another, often just in the knick of time to get out of a jam (Franklin, the most affluent of the protagonists, fortuitously happens upon Stefan & Roberto, the most indigent, saving them from drowning at least twice). Moreover,

the immediate setting furnishes the entire form of this novel, which Robinson avows is borrowed from c19 realism: “it was an experiment in form, in the genre of the French apartment novel...in my version of it, they eventually get to know each other to make the plot more interesting, rather than just a collection of short stories.”³² Setting anchors plot and galvanizes form; the Met Life setting and apartment novel form indicate the realist aspirations of this novel, which expressly harken to older literary moments of realism. This activation of literary history is redoubled by its contrast with “the novel in short stories” so prominent in the high literary fiction market in the twenty-first century. For Robinson the novel is not many disjoint stories, but one - with a strong principle of connection, a unique kind of synthesizing, the common room of social space.

The building’s endurance despite its namesake’s legacy of collapse attests as well to how little has changed from the time of publication in 2017 to the time of setting in 2140. On the one hand, architectural construction materials seem to be the prime new development - there are skyscrapers 300 feet in the air thanks to superlight superstrong graphene fabrication. On the other hand, the old buildings like Met Life have stuck around, retrofitted with internal waterproofing, lower-story boat parking, green roofing, and loggia farms. All these architectural details hewing to the space-time continuum differentiate realism from science fiction and effectuate realism’s trademark infrastructural, institutional concerns.³³

In dwelling on the infrastructure of old buildings and ordinary construction, *New York 2140* anchors its floating future in the current present of practicable maintenance. This immersive continuity between future and present instantiates the literary atmosphere as ubiquitous connectivity, and the diegetic conductor of that connectivity, girding setting to character, is none other than Vlade, the Met’s hyper super. Always alert, always working, always valeting, Vlade maintains the building’s water systems, parks its boats, monitors its residents, and ensures its structural soundness. Strikingly, his is the *only* point of view to feature in all eight parts of the novel. In a variable narrative, the invariant Vlade gives his orientation an infrastructural function within the novel itself, redoubling the genre’s emphasis upon setting and worldmaking, the form’s emphasis upon setting and apartment tropes, and the style’s emphasis upon setting and ordinary physical details. This gravitational force foregrounds the practical, quotidian habitus of infrastructure maintenance and mechanical engineering, of domestic vigilance and historic preservation. Right now, with these limited tools, it seems to say, these old buildings from these old accumulation cycles and old climates, these old houses of fiction, can be repurposed, retrofitted, renovated, retooled for greater hosting of human life. Not new technology but rather new commitments can acclimate the infrastructure to postcarbon modernity.

Vlade’s omnipresent infrastructural care-taking forges character from out of setting. His labor ballasts everyday life and weathers climate emergencies, and he

even plays a vital role in supporting speculative adventures by introducing Stefan and Roberto to a tugboat-dredge operator who ultimately hoovers up the treasure they've been hunting. His can-do omniscience centers the novel, and opens the hatch whereby the capitalist realist style comes up for air. For it is through the sustained normalcy provided by infrastructure that *New York 2140* uplifts its atmosphere; all that maintenance of the pile under water felicitously conditions the book's breezy dry ambience.

Atmospheric Antics

Turning now to gauge this atmosphere in more detail, we can start by admitting that atmosphere is a foggy literary concept, befitting the steamy vapors of its etymology. As Dora Zhang helpfully notes in her study of retail atmospheres, "the problem is that we are dealing with a kind of relationality that is total, the kind that has been called ecological, global, or cosmological. This renders it ill-suited to analysis, which means the 'breaking up of a complex whole into its basic elements or constituent parts.'" ³⁴ Atmosphere, this framing of the problem suggests, cannot fully be elaborated as produced by component parts since, Gernot Böhme asserts, "atmospheres are totalities, atmospheres imbue everything, they tinge the whole...(and thus they) have something irrational about them, in a literal sense, something inexpressible."³⁵ Inexpressible, unanalyzable, supra-elemental, an ambient envelope with too many slits. Jesse Oak Taylor explains, "atmosphere hovers around the text. Rather than lying either on the surface or concealed in the depths, atmosphere extends outward to envelop the interpenetrating contexts of composition, production, and reception as the work moves through the world, accumulating new meanings and spawning unanticipated effects."³⁶ Such outward extension often compels critics to conflate atmosphere with tone and reduce its qualities onto affect, especially reader affect. New Critical theories of tone define it as "attitude;" Russian formalists similarly plot a spectrum of tonal variation by which a text expresses orientation toward its object that either "scolds or caresses, denigrates or magnifies."³⁷ Picking up on this sense of judgement, the contemporary aesthetic theorist Sianne Ngai designates tone "a literary text's affective bearing, orientation, or 'set toward' its audience and world."³⁸ Here tone can be dephenomenalized back in to atmosphere, since Ngai emphasizes that this set toward the world is often ideology's literary guise, concluding "to speak of tone is thus to generalize, totalize, and abstract the 'world' of the literary object, in a way that seems particularly conducive to the analysis of ideology."

All caveats about its un-analyzability aside, to measure *New York 2140*'s "set toward" its world, we might take up some formal elements that mix in to its critical ideological break with capitalist realism. Fomenting atmosphere through the omniscient narrator's use of humor, through the impersonality in the interplay of this omniscience with its polyfocal structure and its copious epigraphs, and through a fishtailing dance from elision to hyperbole and back again, the novel counters

ideological melancholy with ideological mirth. For starters, there are a lot of jokes! Who knew the aftermath of ecological destruction would be so *droll*? Clever and even callous, improvisational and neologistic, the humor is on virtually every page, but here's one telling clip:

So the very disregard for the consequences of their carbon burn had unleashed the ice that caused the rise of sea level that wrecked the global distribution system and caused a depression that was even more damaging to the people of that generation than the accompanying refugee crisis, which, using the unit popular at the time, was rated at fifty katrinas... People stopped burning carbon much faster than they thought they could before the First Pulse. They closed that barn door the very second the horses had gotten out. The four horses, to be exact...People sometimes say no one saw it coming, but no, wrong, they did. Paleoclimatologists looked at the modern situation and saw CO₂ levels screaming up from 280 to 450 parts per million in less than three hundred years, faster than had ever happened in the Earth's entire previous five billion years (can we say "Anthropocene" class?) They searched the geological record for this unprecedented event, and they said, Whoa. They said, Holy shit. People!... They put it in bumper sticker terms...they published papers...and a few canny and deeply thoughtful sci-fi writers wrote up lurid accounts of such an eventuality, and the rest of civilization went on torching the planet like a Burning Man Pyromasterpiece.

Damning the pedantic experts and the unimaginative fiction writers and the carnival consumers in one blade-swoop, the omniscience on opiates swims through metafictional insouciance, unforgivable puns, and value theory badinage. Surprisingly fun! Extinction gallows humor conditions the book's atmosphere, introducing a disjuncture between the determinism of climate depression and political determinations of our ecology.

The humor's crack of depression's crush is also owing to its vehiculation through impersonal and abstract narration. The atmospheric epicenter is the chipper cicerone "The Citizen," the most generic of the multiple points of view, cruising omnisciently with far more historical expertise and technological insight than any of the individual characters. Epigraphs for every chapter bounce between literary history, political theory, music lyrics, and real talk, and the citizen passages work as apostrophized epigraphs, synthesizing past witticisms into present charming chatter. The impression imparted is one of amused angel of history, overseeing centuries of transformations, making cocktail party repartee reparations for the ignorance of present companions. There is a playfulness involved in smartassing the voice of history, ironizing the pomp of omniscience, and a most signature move involves the citizen telling the reader that

they can skip these sections. In its very first section, in its very first paragraph, “a citizen” announces “If you don’t care...sail ahead a page or two to resume voyeuring the sordidities of the puny primates crawling or paddling around this great bay. If you’re okay pondering the big picture, the ground truth, read on.”³⁹ And the invitation to “get back to the narrating of the antics of individual humans [by] skip[ing] to the next chapter” frequently recurs.⁴⁰ The trick, though, is that nothing in the book’s waters makes sense without these beacons, and that they are so very much fun that I for one think they should be bundled together and sold as their own little literary Marxist marvel.

The citizen passages counter the capitalist realist fixture of the story, the immortality of capitalism, with optimism, wit, playfulness. These paramount narrations admit their own circumventing the dystopian truths of climate hell, busily glossing over “complete psychodrama decade[s], a meltdown in history, a breakdown in society, a refugee nightmare, an eco-catastrophe, the planet gone collectively nuts.” Equally passed over is the moderately idyllic interlude after the first pulse in the mid 21st century, when decarbonization efforts surged and governments prioritized social welfare, only for capital to resurge in a new “shock doctrine” after a few decades.⁴¹ Marking its elisions, the narrative lays out its atmospheric agenda: “we won’t go there now, that’s pessimistic boo-hooing and giving-upness.”⁴²

Further diffusing the atmosphere is the book’s formally distinctive epigraphic logorrhea, a commitment to at least one and usually many epigraphs at the start of every single chapter. Given how many chapters there are, this grants lots of airtime to the voice of the epigraphs, and their total distribution throughout the book composes a veritable ecology, a floating and immersive network humectifying the history of ideas and abundant jokes. In this way, the epigraphs function as infrastructure of the atmosphere, skyways and canal bridges trussing the drowned town. Like the impersonality of infrastructure, the epigraphs voice all kinds of sentiments from all kinds of places, including literary giants, political leaders, and artists, while others lack provenances: some have a speaker but not a source, and some have neither, etherealizing literary quips, political truisms, and New York complaint. Deeper within the epigraphs themselves, sassy backtalk introduces agon and relationality – a meta voice that rises above even the epi-graph retorting “Really?” or “Supposedly.” or “Hard to believe.”⁴³ The very first epigraph for the entire book, from Henry James, establishes the vertiginous piss-taking in which this 613 page brick will effulgently indulge: “To be brief about it-”. Epitome of high realism in his theories even more than his practice, James was never, ever brief. The high literary joke at the beginning extends to countless citations of high theory throughout, composing a sensibility of erudition, projection, and synthesis, as well as hyper-deliberate telling-not-showing. With these allusions, Dr. Robinson takes his place in the recent tradition of “theory novels”; as he puts it “I’m not a theorist myself, but if you give me a theory I can turn it into a science fiction novel. I’m like a magpie.”⁴⁴ Hoarder of theory, accumulator

of abstraction, Robinson creates here an antic exaltation of novelistic polyphony and critical conjecture.

The epigraphs are one of the ways this novel disperses and complicates perspective, layering together historical consciousness, literary history, and embodied or disembodied points of view. The narrative's expansive focalization also does this, unfolding in two techniques first developed in the epoch of high realism: mutifocalization (*The Woman in White* first go), and a split between first person and third person perspectives (*Bleak House* first go). There are 8 focal points of view, utterly uneven in kind: four individual women, two pairs of men, one individual man, one individual man in the first person, and a variform third person. None are bad guys; the first person exposes its own narcissism but harbors no malevolence. There are also 8 parts to the novel, each with a title, each featuring a lettered sequence rotating through the 8 viewpoints. But there is nothing regular about the rotation of the 8 points within the 8 parts. Only one part features all 8 points of view respectively (1). Only one point of view features in all 8 parts (Vlade). Two parts feature the plural third person twice (3 and 6). Six parts repeat a point of view twice within the part, though not distributedly (Part 2 has two Franklins, Part 3 two Citizens, Part 4 two Franklins, Part 5 two Gens, Part 6 two Citizens and two Stefan & Robertos, Part 7 two Citizens and two Gens). All this irregularity is bookended by the very first chapter of Part 1 and the very last chapter of Part 8 both belonging to Mutt & Jeff, that double-consonanted pair.

Lest the chapters devoted to the omniscient impersonal third person "a citizen" appear a stable "grandly sweeping overview" (34) alternative to the individuals, the pairs, and Franklin's personal narration, the book destabilizes such an illusion by subtracting "a citizen" from Part 2, then beginning Part 3 with "the citizen," ending Part 3 with "that citizen," recurring to "a citizen" in Part 4, "that citizen" in Part 5, "a citizen" and "the citizen redux" in Part 6, changing to "the city smartass" and finally "the city" in Part 7, and returning to "the citizen" for the penultimate section of Part 8. The progression of these omniscient passages from an indefinite "a citizen" to the definite "the city" reprises the quintessential Dickensian trope of protagonizing the city. New York is the ultimate character here, as already virtually personified in the title's subjectification. Such prioritizing of space and setting, with its attendant tropes of infrastructure and architecture and sociability, help direct the thinking this book does away from individual enterprise or character psychology and toward the more expansive aim of literary realism, the speculative projection of possible worlds. Citizenship, this changeability suggests, is fundamentally a rotational and pluralizable position, repetitive and unique, general and particular, definite and indefinite, the personification of a collective and of a collective locale, metropolitan and provincial, venerable and censurable. That this voice speaks in the present tense amplifies the resonances between the future and the present, exhorting those in the present to hear the citizen and even to affiliate themselves to citizenry. The shiftiness

of citizenship becomes thus a profound point from Aristotelian political theory about the impersonal and official character of citizenship, the purely formal rotational lieutenancy in collective sovereignty.

Even as the citizen's voice enjoys only so much dedicated primetime, these sections of the novel cohere in their zealous hyperbole, the overflowing which is, we've noted apropos economic and oceanic liquidity traps, the novel's master trope. Already there, the precise sea level rise that has already taken place in 2140 vastly exceeds what even the most pessimistic models forecast. The IPCC report calculates at the worst a possible rise of 8 feet by 2100 and 18 feet by 2150. Robinson calculates a "First Pulse" that collapses the Greenland ice sheet, followed by a "Second Pulse" breaking up Antarctica, together resulting in a rise of 50 feet. His world, in other words, is more than twice as submerged as even the worst scientific predications anticipate. Such superfluity submerges the flooding into trope, awash with the connections between financial liquidity, underwater housing, and carbon modernity.

The hyperboles are further thrown by plenteous neologisms exceeding pedestrian semantics, the inflationary grandiosity of the scale (ancient history to the future, Walter Benjamin and Giovanni Arrighi to Virginia Woolf and Fran Lebovitz), and, most strikingly, flooded syntax, the hyperbole atmospherizes its own hilarity. Paragraph after paragraph is built of appositional structures that accrue in waves, proliferating synonyms, performing possibility, Whitmanian catalogs and Melvillian "info-dumps," an Economic Optimism Index of tropological acrobatics. Here, for instance, is one of the opening passages, signature parataxis:

So it isn't all that special, this NOO YAWK of ours. And yet. And yet and yet and yet. Maybe there's something to it. Hard to believe, hard to admit, pain-in-the-ass place that it is, bunch of arrogant fuckheads, no reason for it to be anything special, a coincidence, just the luck of the landscape, the bay and the bight, the luck of the draw, space and time congealing to a history, to have come into being in its moment, accidentally growing the head, guts, and tumescent genitals of the American dream, the magnet for desperate dreamers, the place made of people from everywhere else, the city of immigrants, the people made of other people, very rude people, loudmouthed obnoxious assholes, often, but more often just oblivious and doing their own thing with no regard for you or yours, many strangers banging into each other, dodging each other, almost polite you might say, using the city-sharpened skill of looking past or through people, of not seeing the other, the crowds just background tapestries for you to play your life against, lurid backdrops providing a fake sense of drama to help you imagine you're doing more than you would be if you were in some sleepy village or Denver or really anywhere else.

Reminiscent of Dickensian/Flaubertian reality effects in their accumulation of asemantic excess, these gushes make of prose a wave train powering this long novel's strikingly fast peppy flux.

Hyperbole synthesizes the too-muchness of capitalist realism's resignation, the gross exaggeration of hurtling toward the end of the world with no imagination of anything else, or with no willingness to do anything partial. The zombie immutability of capitalist realism is its own excess; Robinson's dissonance between capitalist realist worlding and jolly-utopian atmosphere exposes the inbuilt exaggeration of foreclosed horizons.

Literary atmosphere is hard to track, and the earth's atmosphere is hard to directly perceive. But atmosphere is the precise matter of capitalogenic climate change: "carbon dioxide in the atmosphere traps heat in the atmosphere...that trapped heat in the atmosphere transfers very easily and naturally to the oceans, warming ocean water...those warmer ocean currents circulate all over."⁴⁵ Atmosphere is at once the result and cause of fossil capitalism; *New York 2140* dereifies it to remind us of the political project to remake it - it carbonates the carbonized, bubbling toward political transformation after all has already been done. Where any novelist must be tasked with the deliberate production of atmosphere, Robinson has explicitly thematized this task in his Mars Trilogy's infrastructural adventure of engineering habitable atmosphere, and he goes one better in this later novel, gushing the super-troping of liquidity to yield something tidally different from the blahs of capitalist realism. *New York 2140* experiments with rendering atmosphere palpable and conspicuous, constructed and contingent, offering a bobbing enthusiasm for climate science, social critique, and the collective populace which opposes the sink of capitalist realism and revolutionary purity alike.

The book's final scene, a small packed midtown intertidal dance party to "the tightest West African pop," epitomizes the atmospheric refusal of dystopian depression, gyrating away from capitalist realism to follow the up beat.⁴⁶ Using outmoded high realist mode to mediate capitalist realism as the mood of totalized financial ecocide, *New York 2140* makes art out of the too late, wielding the tension between content and form to effect good humored can-do-ness for modest remedies. True, in celebrating historical consciousness and collectivization projects, it offers socialist incrementalism in place of radical anti-capitalism. Like the Green New Deal, "it describes something that could happen in the real world." But that's a start, and the onliest start available right now, President Sanders or no. *New York 2140* tenders an inspiring fiction - a fiction in the radical sense of forming, making, making do, making shifts - that the future can be less worse. It is too late. But untimely fictions can continue to help us imagine collective and even statist projects that can still weld how horribly we go out. Irrational exuberance in the alluvion: do it now.

Notes

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3. Robinson, *New York 2140* 205.
4. On this genre, See Nicholas Dames, "The Theory Generation," *n+1*, issue 14 (Summer 2012). www.nplusonemag.com/issue-14/reviews/the-theory-generation/
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7. See, *Reading Capitalist Realism*, ed. Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014).
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9. See, Rafi Letzter, "A brilliant sci-fi thriller imagines how the massive floods of climate change could transform Earth," *Business Insider* (April 8, 2017). www.businessinsider.com/review-kim-stanley-robinsons-new-york-2140-2017-4
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15. Paradigmatically, Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971); Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981) and Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (New York: Verso, 2013).
16. Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel* 56.
17. Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel* 56.
18. Jeremy Rosen, "Literary Fiction and the Genres of Genre Fiction," *Post45* (August 7, 2018). www.post45.research.yale.edu/2018/08/literary-fiction-and-the-genres-of-genre-fiction/
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 22. Samuel R. Delany, "Science Fiction and 'Literature'—or, The Conscience of the King," in *Speculations on Speculation: Theories of Science Fiction*, ed. James E. Gunn and Matthew Candelaria (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2005) 103.
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 24. Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 24.
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 37. V.N. Voloshinov, "Discourse in Life and Discourse in Poetry (Concerning Sociological Poetics)," in *Freudianism: A Critical Sketch*, ed. I.R. Titunik and N.R. Bruss (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1987) 104-5.
 38. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007) 43.
 39. *New York* 2140 32.
 40. *New York* 2140 141.

41. *New York* 2140 378.
42. *New York* 2140 34.
43. *New York* 2140 82; 97; 341.
44. Robinson and Feder, "The realism of our time: Interview with Kim Stanley Robinson."
45. *New York* 2140 141.
46. *New York* 2140 611.

realism "but indeed, a style with little of the affective tenor of Fisher's original conceit, since these products so boundingly enthuse destruction, and mostly conclude with superhero exhortations like "Now let's rebuild!" On another channel, critics have affirmed that realism is "the aesthetic mode most intimate to capitalism" and tracked a resurgence of high realist style in visual and literary culture since the 2008 global economic crisis.⁷ The features of this style they delineate as "omniscient narration" as well as "its mimetic and documentary registers, its assumptions about actuali That climate change is "a stalking horse for National Socialism" (former Republican senator and retired astronaut Harrison Schmitt). And that environmentalists are like Aztec priests, sacrificing countless people to appease the gods and change the weather (Marc Morano, editor of the denialists' go-to website, ClimateDepot.com). Yes, sure, there is a pretense that the delegates' rejection of climate science is rooted in serious disagreement about the data. And the organizers go to some lengths to mimic credible scientific conferences, calling the gathering "Restoring the Scientific Method" and even adopting the organizational acronym ICCG, a mere one letter off from the world's leading authority on climate change, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). This is Climate Realism, very similar to Socialist Realism. Not only does solar power, at the plant gate, cost 4-8 times as much as conventional power, but it is erratic and seasonal to say nothing of not working at night. It also needs to be placed in the southwest where there is a lot of sunshine. Hybrid cars are cars with a small battery, good for about 1 mile, that recycles energy otherwise lost to braking, resulting in better fuel economy. Hybrid cars are actually practical, unlike their big battery brothers. The government subsidizes electric cars and forces manufacturers to offer them by various quotas. As an exercise in Climate Realism, government is sponsoring a 5-5-5 project at the Argonne National Lab near Chicago for \$120 million. WORKING PAPER 307. Idealism, Realism and the Investment. Climate in Developing Countries. Mick Moore and Hubert Schmitz. June 2008. Minimum Size. others to do so. Investors may also need assurances that governments will come to their aid in times of trouble and otherwise use their authority in a supportive way. c) Business and politics: interdependence. Capitalist Realism is less a unified style than a set of political ideas and beliefs about art, Western culture, and capitalism. Critical towards traditional artistic and social values, Capitalist Realists employed photorealism, mechanical reproduction, as well as collage to take aim at their subjects. Because they rejected the unique, auratic art work that had traditionally been hailed by Modernism Capitalist Realism is one of the first recognizable Postmodern movements. While Capitalist Realism has had a global influence reaching to Japan and China, it was originally calibrated to the specif