"Life! Life!": The Precarious Utopianism of Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the utopianism of Kim Stanley Robinson's 2017 sf novel New York 2140*, the world of which is defined by a nexus of profound climatological disasters. In contrast to other texts in the growing cli-fi (climate fiction) genre, Robinson's seemingly apocalyptic world is a representation of a disaster utopia—real-world networks of care, compassion, collaboration, and utopian joy that emerge in the wake of disasters. In* New York 2140 *Robinson explores the valences of disaster utopianism beyond its contemporary, exceptional appearances, contemplating how communities can flourish in a world where disaster emerges as a direct result of capitalist precarity and inequality. The article situates* New York 2140 *within a newly emerging corpus of cultural work that calls for a direct confrontation with the destructive powers of the present by understanding utopia as a precarious and never-finished form of resistance to neoliberal late capitalism.*

KEYWORDS: *climate fiction, anticapitalist activism, disaster utopias, commons, cli-fi*

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The 2017 novel *New York 2140* by American author Kim Stanley Robinson is set in a near future world a century away, defined by runaway global warming, unregulated finance, economic inequality, sensationalized mass media, and civil unrest—in other words, a world strikingly similar to ours. In the intertidal zone of Manhattan, stretching from the low tide mark at the south tip of the peninsula to the high tide mark at 125th Street, life resembles "earlier centuries of cheap squalid tenement reality, moldier than ever, the occupants risking their lives by the hour. Same as ever, but wetter." New York, like the rest of the planet, has become the site of a climatological, social, and economic disaster on a scale never before seen, only imagined in the accounts of "a few canny and deeply thoughtful sci-fi writers [who] wrote up lurid accounts of such an eventuality."[1]

New York 2140 is informed by meticulous scientific research into the extreme possibilities of global warming under the auspices of neoliberalism, and in response to such research, Robinson himself has stated that

> the window of opportunity to shape our future for the best is closing fast. Ecological destruction is accelerating, new environmental problems keep cropping up, and the outdated thinking that informs today's status quo is proving all too resistant to thoughtful response.[2]

Despite all this, *New York 2140* has been widely described as a "surprisingly utopian," "genuinely utopian," and "decidedly utopian" text.[3] How is it that a novel so concerned with disaster on a number of scales can be conceived of as utopian? In what ways does this novel work toward Robinson's project of representing a future based around "the story of humanity devoting itself to nurturing the health of the biosphere and creating a sustainable prosperity for all the living creatures on this planet . . . a good Anthropocene"?[4]

New York 2140 as Cli-fi Text

Robinson has been described as America's most committed (and perhaps, as he himself ironically remarks, last) utopian writer.[5] *New York 2140* marks a new stage in what Gerry Canavan describes as Robinson's "construction of a huge metatextual history of the future, not unlike those sagas imagined by Asimov or Heinlein in the Golden Age of Science Fiction, distributed across

overlapping but distinct and mutually irreconcilable texts," and therefore pays particular attention to topics that were noted in passing in earlier works such as the *Mars* trilogy (1992, 1993, 1996) and *2312* (2012)—in particular ice sheet collapse and mass species extinction.[6]

Robinson's status as a utopian writer is rare partly because the term "utopia" has had a contested history in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, being frequently used disparagingly by liberal thinkers such as Karl Popper and politicians such as Margaret Thatcher to describe unrealistic and totalitarian visions for social transformation.[7] Robinson's novels are utopian primarily in that their alternative social and spatial visions—Antarctic research bases, eco-villages, colony ships, and extraplanetary cities—are rarely deliberate designs for better worlds, but are open spaces for experimentation, imagination, discourse, and constructive failure. As a character remarks in his early novel *Pacific Edge* (1990), this is a definition of utopia as "struggle forever" rather than "the perfect end-product of our wishes [. . .] the process of making a better world, the name for one path history can take, a dynamic, tumultuous, agonizing process, with no end."[8] This definition hews closer to that developed by utopian critic Lyman Tower Sargent, which purposefully avoids the word "perfect": "there are in fact very few eutopias that present societies that the author believes to be perfect. Perfection is the exception not the norm."[9] Utopian sociologist Ruth Levitas extends this argument, contending that utopian thinking "is not about devising and imposing a blueprint," but far rather "entails holistic thinking about the connections between economic, social, existential and ecological processes in an integrated way," which allows utopian thinkers to "develop alternative possible scenarios for the future and open these up to public debate and democratic decision."[10]

As a holistically integrated critique of our present world, Robinson's future New York is defined by the cataclysmic planetary effects of anthropogenic climate change and economic disaster. The First and Second Pulses, two ice-sheet collapse events that took place in the 2050s and the 2090s, have raised the sea level by fifty feet and permanently half-flooded Manhattan. The First Pulse, a rise of ten feet in ten years, caused an economic 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 as fifty katrinas." The political consequences of the First Pulse are a direct result of the activities of the most wealthy and powerful members of the planet's societies, "a certain particular one percent of the population," to keep their hold

on economic and political power; thus, the rest of the world's population are forced to "buckle down in their traces and accept the idea of austerity, meaning more poverty for the poor." The forty-foot sea-level rise of the Second Pulse, caused by a positive feedback loop in sea temperatures, creates a far more serious disaster, "a refugee crisis rated at ten thousand katrinas" and the collapse of world trade routes.[11] The news is even worse for the multitude of species with whom humans share the planet; as one character exclaims:

> We're in the sixth mass extinction event in Earth's history. We caused it. Fifty thousand species have gone extinct, and we're in danger of losing most of the amphibians and the mammals, and all kinds of birds and fish and reptiles. . . . Mainly it's just a disaster, a fucking disaster.[12]

Nevertheless, even after these profound setbacks, by 2140 capitalism has regained its footing and authority: "Apply more police state and more austerity, clamp down hard, proceed as before. Cleaning up the mess a great investment opportunity! Churn baby churn!"[13] In fact, the wholesale destruction of the planet's coastlines becomes the fertile ground for the return of the familiar tactics of neoliberal late capitalism—the privatisation of public services, the rollback of state welfare systems, and the subsumption of communal political activity within the logic of the deregulated market, or, as Wendy Brown writes, "a governing rationality that disseminates market values and metrics to every sphere of life and construes the human itself exclusively as *homo oeconomicus*."[14]

In 2140 the metropolis finds itself divided between a stretch of skyscrapers above 125th Street, which stand on dry land, and the "intertidal" (occasionally and with a degree of irony called "SuperVenice")—a liminal urban zone that is partly above water at low tide and flooded at high tide, dominated by flood-proofed skyscrapers linked by canals and carbon-fiber skybridges. The intertidal is not only liminal, but also littoral—an extended seashore where the constant movement of water makes life dangerous and exciting. Much of the novel's plot revolves around the legal status of the intertidal with regards to private ownership; as Robinson reminds his readers, in many legal systems descendent from the Ancient Roman system, land between the high and low tidelines is "neither private property nor government property, and therefore . . . perhaps some kind of return of the commons."[15] The intertidal locates and

enacts a complex relationship between its inhabitants and capitalism: because it is precarious, with buildings regularly disintegrating under the forces of the tides, property investment in the intertidal is very risky, but the plethora of cheap and free accommodation that is thus made available for squatting has made this area a haven for squatters, artists, criminals, drifters, urchins, and eccentrics who have no place in the established social networks of the dry areas of the city. As a legally, socially, and culturally liminal zone, the intertidal is where the majority of the novel's action happens, and acts throughout the novel as a spatial metaphor for instability, liminality, and transformation.

The narrative of *New York 2140* is divided between the stories of a large and diverse host of characters who mostly live in the Met Life Tower on Madison Square, built in 1909 and now transformed into a partially submerged housing co-operative. Among this motley group are two happy-go-lucky squatter hackers, an NYPD detective, an airship-sailing celebrity who hosts a program of light eco-entertainment, a Wall Street hedge-fund manager, a lifelong housing union organizer, a superintendent, and two canal urchins.

At the critical turning point of the narrative, a hurricane hits New York and causes colossal damage to the city's already precarious infrastructure.[16] In the aftermath of Hurricane Fyodor, thousands of displaced urban refugees occupy Central Park, but the government's ineffective response to the crisis sets off a chain reaction whose component pieces had already been engineered over the course of the novel. After an attempt by refugees to occupy the skyscrapers owned, though barely inhabited by, the neoliberal elite above 125th Street, which ends in a shootout with private security forces, the Householders' Union organizes a mass national rent and debt strike; this unprecedented move precipitates a global financial collapse during which the world's governments nationalize their banks, having learnt from past mistakes, in particular the 2008 financial crisis.[17] By the novel's conclusion, although everyday life continues on much as it has done in the previous decades, and few of the transformations that have been put into action have yet borne measurable results, there is a utopian sense that the system that has controlled the planet for the previous centuries cannot continue on as it was, and that the next stage in global history will be generated in common spaces, egalitarian politics and economics, and sustainable ecosystems.

New York 2140 has emerged at the crest of a wave of highly successful texts that are set in the near present or near future and are concerned

with climate disasters occurring on a planetary scale, often referred to as "cli-fi"—a growing corpus of which some notable examples are the novella *The End We Start From* (Megan Hunter, 2017), the films *Snowpiercer* (dir. Bong Joon-ho, 2013) and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (dir. George Miller, 2015), and the novels *Oryx and Crake* (Margaret Atwood, 2003), *The Island Will Sink* (Briohny Doyle, 2013), *California* (Edan Lepucki, 2014), *The Water Knife* (Paolo Bacigalupi, 2015), *Black Wave* (Michelle Tea, 2015), *Gold Fame Citrus* (Claire Vaye Watkins, 2015), and *American War* (Omar El Akkad, 2017). As is to be expected, the worlds of many of these novels revolve around water—either its deathly lack or its destructive surplus.[18] Like these texts, *New York 2140* offers a vision of Earth and its systems on the road to "the Anthropocide, the Hydrocatastrophe, the Georevolution," a human-engineered breakdown in the balance of the planet's systems so severe that there will be no return from extinction for the majority of its species.[19] Indeed, utopian theorist Ruth Levitas categorizes *New York 2140* as "a dystopia rather than a utopia," justifying this position by writing that dystopias "share with utopias the method of depicting an alternative society, but constitute a warning of what may happen if we go on as we are, rather than a projection of a desired future."[20]

Read in this way, *New York 2140* is as classic a cli-fi text as the fledgling genre can produce—as Rebecca Evans argues, the critical response to cli-fi has praised its "status as an entertaining yet *educational* genre by emphasizing its capacity for realistic (plausible, soberly related, and scientifically grounded) extrapolation into the future."[21] In relation to *New York 2140*, however, this argument holds water only if one were to categorize the fifty-foot rise in sea levels and the resulting hurricanes, floods, and droughts as the central political locus of Robinson's novel, the key feature that is critiqued through Robinson's fictional world-system and the subject of his novel's warning of "what may happen if we go on as we are." But Robinson's future metropolis is defined by far more than these disasters, and indeed, I argue that climate change is only a significant actor in *New York 2140* to the extent of its uneven distribution along intersectional lines, particularly those of species, class, and ethnicity. To understand *New York 2140* as a utopia rather than a dystopia (or a climatological disaster novel more generally) requires an interrogation of the other types of disaster that structure the world of the novel—particularly the disaster of unconstrained neoliberal capitalism.

The Disaster of Neoliberalism

American essayist Rebecca Solnit, in her book *A Paradise Built in Hell* (2009), brings together a wide-ranging corpus of sociological case studies—including the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, the 1989 and 1906 San Francisco earthquakes, the 9/11 attacks, and Hurricane Katrina in 2005—which strongly indicate that in the immediate wake of an unexpected disaster, survivors have a strong tendency to behave altruistically and communally, rapidly self-organize, and sometimes even enjoy themselves, "if *enjoyment*," she writes, "is the right word for that sense of immersion in the moment and solidarity with others caused by the rupture in everyday life."[22] While disasters are objectively destructive occurrences, the witnesses whose testimonies Solnit presents repeat the sentiment that the immediate aftermath of disaster is a truly happy, fulfilling, and well-adjusted period for them and their communities. Solnit's findings are a powerful corrective to the commonly held belief, perpetuated by cultural forms ranging from blockbuster action movies (for example, the Roland Emmerich films *The Day After Tomorrow* [2003] and *2012* [2009]) to news media reports, that those affected by sudden disasters become violent, animalistic, lawless, and destructive.[23] In these narratives, when the steadying, civilizing power of market logics falls away, the survivors tend to destroy civilization far faster than any "natural" disaster and have little interest in rebuilding it. Solnit draws extensively on the work of Charles Fritz, whose 1961 paper "Disasters and Mental Health: Therapeutic Principles Drawn from Disaster Studies" was highly influential on the field of disaster studies. Fritz's own case studies lead him to conclude that, despite such widely held views, in reality:

> Even under the worst disaster conditions, people maintain or quickly regain self control and become concerned about the welfare of others. . . . Reports of looting in disasters are grossly exaggerated; rates of theft and burglary actually decline in disasters; and much more is given away than stolen. Other forms of antisocial behavior, such as aggression toward others and scapegoating, are rare or nonexistent. Instead, most disasters produce a great increase in social solidarity among the stricken populace, and this newly created solidarity tends to reduce the incidence of most forms of personal and social pathology.[24]

Fritz does not dispute the fact that disasters are "occasions for profound human misery," but draws attention to the equally salient and overlooked truth that they "have always produced many beneficent effects on surviving personal and social systems." Fritz and Solnit agree that by far the more damaging disaster in twentieth and twenty-first century society, in terms of "aggregate amount of death, destruction, pain, and privation" it has caused and continues to cause, is the disaster of "'normal' life," or as Solnit puts it, "everyday life become a social disaster."[25] Although their studies are written almost five decades apart, the two argue in one voice that the primary cause of the anxiety and precariousness felt in everyday life is "the very structure of our economy and society," defined by "individualism, capitalism, and Social Darwinism," alongside the "privatization of desire and imagination that tells us we are not each other's keeper."[26] Fritz similarly emphasizes "social atomization and social alienation as the root causes of the social and psychological pathologies of everyday life."[27]

In the moment of a momentary and unexpected disaster, as Solnit and Fritz indicate, when "the threats and dangers to the society come from outside the system," the neoliberal capitalist structures of control that atomize, alienate, and differentially enact violence on their subject populations collapse and in their place, with very few exceptions, appears a necessary new social and grassroots political structure of survival, solidarity, community, and mutual aid.[28] The real transformation in social and political life that occurs in moments of disaster is caused not by the disaster itself, but by the retreat of neoliberalism; furthermore, while Solnit frequently brings to bear the concept of "human nature," it is not human nature that is altered at the moment of disaster, but the forces that condition and modulate human interrelations. We can turn this argument around to conclude that the "possibility of paradise," of what Solnit characterizes as "disaster utopia," is always "on the cusp of coming into being" beneath normalized neoliberal society, "so much so that it takes powerful forces to keep such a paradise at bay."[29] But, as Solnit points out, these utopias have always been temporary, lasting only as long as the neoliberal order, with its reliance on a functioning and highly technologised market-economic system and the hegemonic control enacted by a militarised police force, is forced to recede from the disaster zone. When the neoliberal state returns to fill the void, the re-enforcement of order is usually violent—emergency law is imposed, with poor nonwhite bodies regularly coded as "looters" and private security forces and vigilantes as "defenders of law and order."[30]

Moreover, the reimposition of order during times of profound shock and destruction is frequently an opportunity for neoliberal capitalism to reinforce or remake structures of economic and political control. This strategy has been extensively theorized, in particular by Joseph Schumpeter as the familiar concept of "creative destruction" and by Naomi Klein as the "shock doctrine," the use, by corporate interests, of "moments of collective trauma to engage in radical social and economic engineering."[31] For Schumpeter, creative destruction was "the essential fact about capitalism" and a necessary part of capitalist development; it was tied into the process of innovation, which "incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure *from within*, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one," thus keeping the market dynamic and active.[32] Klein exposes the violent economic and political strategies that allow capitalist innovation to flourish in the wake of social upheavals, whether unplanned or orchestrated, but underlines that the "raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities" that together define "disaster capitalism" are always orchestrated and are never simply lucky opportunities.[33] It is precisely in this mode that Frank, the hedge-fund manager character in *New York 2140*, extolls his Intertidal Property Price Index, which allows Wall Street traders to bet on the stability of coastal property in the ongoing climate crisis:

> And it wasn't that hard to invent new derivatives, as we had found out, because the floods had indeed been a case of creative destruction, which of course is capitalism's middle name. Am I saying that the floods, the worst catastrophe in human history, equivalent or greater to the twentieth century's wars in their devastation, were actually good for capitalism? Yes, I am.[34]

Indeed, just as Robinson made use of empirical forecasting and mapping tools to flood his New York, *New York 2140* is a convincing representation, via reasoned extrapolation into the near future, of the survival strategies of neoliberal capitalism. Specifically, a visitor to Robinson's future New York, which is controlled by anonymous corporations, private security forces, hedge funds, corrupt politicians, and heavily leveraged banking conglomerates, can be forgiven for assuming that it is simply the New York of our present, but a little wetter.[35]

Solnit's conclusions index the relationship between neoliberalism, sudden disaster, and the subjects who are affected by both. When neoliberalism is ascendant, subjects are individualized, alienated, and thrust out of both their communities and any sense of their own ability to enact meaningful political change. When neoliberalism wanes, these subjects are able to come together and act in ways that are social, communal, collaborative, and productive. Although the spaces disaster makes are precarious, full of immediate physical dangers, they are not spaces of *precarity*, because as political theorist Isabel Lorey shows, precarity is a strategy of control that differentially and unequally exposes individual subjects to danger, while precariousness is a fundamental ontological feature of communal human existence. "Precariousness becomes 'co-extensive' at birth," writes Lorey, "since survival depends from the beginning on social networks, on sociality and the work of others. . . . Because life is precarious, it is crucially dependent on care and reproduction." Thus, "the conditions that enable life," that is, the structures of social reproduction and care, "are, at the same time, exactly those that maintain it as precarious."[36] The almost certain failure of neoliberal strategies of "precarization" in the face of a sufficiently disruptive disaster, however temporary, demonstrate the profound fragility of the neoliberal system, particularly in the sense of its inability to weather profound and unexpected shocks, or what Nassim Nicholas Taleb characterizes as "black swan events."[37]

Fundamentally, however, the awareness of the weakness of neoliberalism at certain moments, coupled with the conclusion that neoliberal strategies of control disrupt cohesive social life and the absence of those strategies allows social life to rapidly develop again, does not translate to a set of coherent or productive tactics for opposing neoliberalism. Such tactics would, to adopt Graham Jones's phrase, be a "shock doctrine of the left," helping anticapitalist social and political movements to create disaster utopias of communal survival that are permanent, generative, able to offer relatively secure forms of life to their inhabitants, and as resilient in the long term as disaster capitalism has shown itself to be.[38] *New York 2140* is among a small, but growing, number of books that might represent the tactics these movements need.

From Disaster Utopias to Disaster Commons

In a recent essay, the Out of the Woods collective takes up Fritz and Solnit's formulation of disaster as generative of temporary communal solidarities,

able to quickly produce and distribute the necessary means for material survival after a disaster in the absence of the "normal" relations of capitalist society. Crucially, they take the idea further, arguing, "we must go beyond Solnit's empirical focus on what happens in response to *specific* disaster-events and grasp the character of the *capitalist disaster*." Out of the Woods is one of a growing group of theorists including Fredric Jameson, Lauren Berlant, and Mark Fisher who categorize capitalist strategies of daily life as an "ongoing" or "ordinary" disaster.[39] These terms index a sense of the present in which there is no perception of an alternative to the alienations, depravations, and precarities of what Jameson calls "the seamless Moebius strip of late capitalism," in particular for populations who are already made vulnerable and exploitable along intersectional lines including race, gender, and citizenship.[40] The Out of the Woods collective emphasizes that while those made precarious by neoliberal capitalism are always the ones most exposed to disaster, it need not be neoliberal capitalism that always profits in disaster's wake. What Out of the Woods christens "disaster communism" and Solnit calls "disaster utopia" is the transformation of everyday, ongoing struggles against "disaster-as-condition" into a new, resistant, utopian mode of social reproduction. To quote Out of the Woods at length:

> The communism of disaster communism, then, is a transgressive and transformative mobilization without which the unfolding catastrophe of global warming cannot and will not be stopped. It is simultaneously an undoing of the manifold structural injustices which perpetuate and draw strength from disaster, and an enactment of the widespread collective capacity to endure and flourish on a rapidly changing planet. It is hugely ambitious, requiring redistribution of resources at several scales; reparations for colonialism and slavery; expropriation of private property for Indigenous peoples; and the abolition of fossil fuels, among other monumental projects.[41]

Out of the Woods sees disaster communism as emerging out of abundance—not a material abundance of commodities or security, but a "collective abundance" of self-perpetuating social relations, which is able to continue generating itself against and beyond neoliberalism, producing future forms of communal resistance and emancipation to meet and survive future disasters. Robinson himself makes a similar conclusion in a piece in the same issue of *Commune*:

> An adequate life provided for all living beings is something the planet can still do; it has sufficient resources, and the sun provides enough energy. There is a sufficiency, in other words; adequacy for all is not physically impossible. It won't be easy to arrange, obviously, because it would be a total civilizational project, involving technologies, systems, and power dynamics; but it is possible.[42]

While Out of the Woods accedes that in terms of enacting such monumental and necessary projects, "we are not there yet," works of science fiction like Robinson's can shine a light onto the tactics of that "not yet," a hermeneutic form Ernst Bloch calls "anticipatory illumination," which allows subjects to see different and diverse forms of concrete social life beyond those presented by the ongoing present.[43] Through anticipatory illumination, we can make sense of the strategies required to begin building concrete utopias in the present.

The world Robinson presents in *New York 2140*, then, can be read in precisely the mode demanded by Out of the Woods, as a dialectical analysis of two forms of disaster—*momentary* and *ongoing*. In Robinson's future, just as now, the destructive consequences of momentary disasters like hurricanes and floods are distributed unequally across populations. This differential distribution is conditioned by a nexus of ongoing disasters, chief among which are neoliberalism, colonialism, and ecocide, which ensure that factors including social class, citizenship, wealth, race, gender, and species play a key role in deciding who survives momentary disasters and who doesn't. As Out of the Woods writes, so-called natural disasters "are always co-productions in which natural forces such as plate tectonics and weather systems work together with social, political, and economic forces."[44] This is precisely the way in which Robinson darkly frames the food crisis that follows the First Pulse, as a disaster that does not occur naturally but is heavily conditioned and unevenly distributed by the social and political systems within which it is embedded:

> Average weight loss for adults worldwide through the late 2070s amounted to several kilos, less in the prosperous countries where it was sometimes welcomed as a diet that worked (at last), more in developing countries where the kilos were not there to be lost, except to death.[45]

It is always among the populations where disaster is felt most acutely that its effects are most pronounced. The warning that serves as the political locus of *New York 2140*, then, is not about climate change or, rather, not about climate change alienated from the complex network of systems that condition its existence. As Donna Haraway reminds us, to name our newly begun geological epoch, defined by the deposits of nuclear materials in mineral layers and the rising acidity of the oceans, the *Anthropocene* is to lay the blame at the feet of the wrong culprit: "if we could only have one word for these SF times, surely it must be the Capitalocene. Species Man did not shape the conditions for the Third Carbon Age or the Nuclear Age."[46] The critical target of *New York 2140* is nothing less than the ordinary disaster of neoliberalism.

It is significant to note that while *New York 2140* is set in a future world replete with solar-powered airships, carbon-fiber architecture, and "block-necklace" currencies, Robinson's protagonists deploy a range of tactics to oppose neoliberalism that would not look remotely unfamiliar in a novel set during a contemporary anticapitalist revolution. Robinson makes extensive use throughout his work of this textual strategy, in which the empirical-realist function of science fiction is used to highlight the possibility of utopian futures, while its cognitive estrangement function is used to make plain the far-from-utopian realities of the present:

> For a while now I've been saying that science fiction works by a kind of double action, like the glasses people wear when watching 3D movies. One lens of science fiction's aesthetic machinery portrays some future that might actually come to pass; it's a kind of proleptic realism. The other lens presents a metaphorical vision of our current moment, like a symbol in a poem. Together the two views combine and pop into a vision of History, extending magically into the future.[47]

The "magical" extension of contemporary attempts to enact a truly emancipatory politics into a more positive future, to which Robinson alludes here, is what sets his work apart from much other contemporary science fiction as fundamentally utopian.

As an urban novel with a fundamentally realist aesthetic, *New York 2140* is concerned with spaces and the relations and networks that produce them—and the intertidal, where much of the novel is set, becomes a fertile ground

for the exploration of productions of space that are intrinsically utopian, and that create utopian spaces through their own taking place. The intertidal, as has been noted above, is an unlikely return of the commons, a space produced through modes of social and political organization that privilege communal, shared, and equitable forms of social and material reproduction: "a proliferation of cooperatives, neighborhood associations, communes, squats, barter, alternative currencies, gift economies, solar usufruct, fishing village cultures, mondragons, unions, Davy's locker freemasonries, anarchist blather, and submarine technoculture." By 2140 this explosion of alternative ways of life is accreting into larger organizations that, while less radical, exert increasing political power in New York. The Met Life tower in which many of the characters live exists under the auspices of the "Lower Manhattan Mutual Aid Society, which was the biggest of many downtown cooperative ventures and associations."[48] It is the union of these cooperative organizations that arranges the major national rent strike that incapacitates the economy and causes an economic crisis; one of the results of the crisis is the institution of what Robinson names a "Piketty Tax," named after the concept espoused by economist Thomas Piketty of a tax on wealth and capital gains to radically decrease financial inequality.[49]

A wealth tax is not the only anticapitalist transformation enacted in the novel's conclusion, where Robinson writes, in the voice of the urban historian and meta-narrator known as the Citizen: "The neoliberal global order was thus overturned right in its own wheelhouse," rapidly leading to "universal health care, free public education through college, a living wage, guaranteed full employment, a year of mandatory national service . . . and please feel free to add your own favorites."[50] While each of the social and political changes described by the Citizen are aspects of variously Left and anticapitalist economic theories, from the welfare statist staples of universal health care and free public education to the more radical concept of universal conscription (which has been proposed, among others, by Robinson's long-time friend Fredric Jameson), what is particularly utopian about this list is that it creates space for Robinson's audience, rather than forcing the conclusion of the book into a limiting blueprint.[51] What is utopian for Robinson, then, is not only a range of social changes directly opposed to neoliberalism, but also the act of asking his readership to participate in planning the specifics of these social changes. Because this readership is multiple, these specifics are already and always mutable and polyvalent. Robinson's utopia is not only anticapitalist,

it is specifically an evocation of a commons—in terms of its liminal spatialities, its range of subjectivities, its concrete tactics for forming networks of material and social support in the wake of disaster, and its metatextual strategies, all of which bring the reader into a discursive commons with Robinson's future world.

The utopian commons Robinson constructs is most powerfully evoked not through economic theorizing, but through the representation of small, close-knit communities of people creating utopias in the wake of disaster, which are built to last, not to disappear, and which are resilient by virtue of their contingency and their flexibility, rather than a monolithic structure. In one such scene, the hackers Mutt and Jeff have given up their keyboards to help their friends in the Met Life tower repair the damage caused by Hurricane Fyodor. Mutt remarks: "Have you noticed that we've gone from being coders to being farmers? It's like one of those dreadful back-to-the-land fantasies you kept giving me." However, the hackers end up dismissing these blueprint pastoral fantasies as "unreadable horseshit," and nineteenth-century transcendentalist utopian Ralph Waldo Emerson as "the greatest fortune cookie writer in American literature," because in the new world they are helping build, the radical individualism he espoused has no place: "'Self-reliance my ass. We're fucking monkeys. It's always about teamwork.'"[52]

A second significant scene occurs in the novel's final chapter: in a tiny submarine speakeasy within the intertidal, three of the characters go dancing to the electrifyingly evoked music of a multiracial ensemble who combine West African pop with klezmer saxophone improv:

> Finally the young reed man stands up and gives the sax mouthpiece a lick, joins right in with the song already going. Okay, this is the star of the band. Immediately he is zooming around in the tune like a maniac. The other horn players instantly get better, the guitar players even more precise and intricate. The vocalists are grinning and shouting duets in harmony. It's like they've all just plugged into an electrical jack through their shoes. The young reed man sounds like he is maybe a klezmer star in his other bands, and it might not have been obvious before that klezmer fits so well with West African pop, but now it's very clear. He swoops up and down the scale, screeches across the supersonic, jams in a perfect driving rhythm with the others. It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing, but it does.[53]

It is with this night in New York that Robinson concludes his novel, rather than with a large-scale political narrative of utopian social restructuring. This scene, however, is among the most politically utopian in the book, because it demands an understanding of politics that comes not from large-scale and abstracted government systems, but from a commons—the unexpected and rewarding connections that emerge between utopian subjects in their desire to create meaningful ways of living together better.

The utopian potential of music, particularly improvisational music, has been attested by a number of utopian theorists. For Ernst Bloch, music was the most utopian of all cultural forms: "no art has so much surplus over the respective time and ideology in which it exists," a surplus of what he evocatively calls "hope-material."[54] Levitas adds that in Bloch's work, music is not just utopian in its anticipation of a utopian world to come, but is prefigurative, evoking that world in the here and now: "through its capacity to communicate that which is not (yet) utterable, music is uniquely capable of conveying and *effecting* a better world; it invokes, as well as prefigures, that world." Of music performance, Levitas argues that "it is often the social practice of performance as much as the music itself that is ascribed prefigurative or transformative utopian qualities. The imputed relationship between the performers is an ideal form of non-conflictual human connection."[55] David M. Bell links musical improvisation directly to the commons, writing that the "intra-actions" of performing improvisational musicians are a form of commoning and thus exemplify the generation of mutually beneficial *power-to* create something together (rather than the more traditional sense of *power-over* others in social relations):

> power exists in encounters and, where these encounters are good, is mutually beneficial: the increase or enhancement of a body's power to act *also* increasing its power to be acted upon, and vice versa. [. . .] This makes possible collective increases in power such that the increase or enhancement of an (in)dividual's power to act also increases the power of other (in)dividuals to act; and thus of the collective body to act, creating what we might refer to as "power-with": a power-in-common.[56]

This empowering commons is evoked when the klezmer player joins the others in the band, integrating his playing into their tunes rather than against or

above them: "The other horn players instantly get better, the guitar players even more precise and intricate." Meanwhile, Mutt, Jeff, and Amelia become common in their absorption into the "big world" of the sweaty, heaving, dancing crowd. This community is both momentary and lasting: momentary because it must be regenerated anew every night, which keeps its transformative potential firmly anchored on a utopian horizon always just out of reach; and lasting because this constant process of improvisational regeneration prevents it from being enclosed and subsumed by capitalism. Seen in this light, the final lines of the novel are particularly utopian, offering a vision of the city as a diffuse, almost invisible network of such momentary utopias, gathering their publics in an expanding commons of music and dance: "'And now, look at this, here we are right on top of the place, and it's like they're not even there!' [. . .] 'Heck, there's probably fifty bands like them playing tonight in this city. Dances like that going on right now, all over town.'"[57]

Joy and fun are just as important to the long-term survival of disaster commons as material production. As Out of the Woods reminds us, the life of social reproduction in disaster commons "isn't just mundane: groups organize parties, dancing lessons, and collective cooking sessions, so that communal horizons might open beyond despair."[58] Sophie Lewis, a member of Out of the Woods, continues this refrain by arguing that "while situations necessitating 'disaster communism' are not exactly enviable, it is obvious that what people are producing in them is joy, rest, conviviality, art, eros; a life worth living against all odds."[59] Turning, in its closing pages, to minor utopian acts of commoning and minor utopian spaces emerging from disaster, *New York 2140* argues that it is collective assemblies of individual subjects and their surprising capacity for hope against the odds, rather than overarching systems and ideologies, which are able to dance into a world beyond capitalism.

Conclusion

From Robinson's depictions of these improvised solidarities and minor commons, we can make a general conclusion regarding the specific forms and strategies adopted by the disaster commons in *New York 2140*. These disaster commons differ from the fleeting disaster utopias explored by Solnit in three interlinked ways. First, they are highly contingent and flexible, echoing in their organizational form the improvisational mode of the music in the

intertidal speakeasy. Second, this improvisational character is founded on the reality that in the world of 2140 momentary disasters are increasingly becoming as commonplace and everyday as the normalized disaster of neoliberalism—a trend we can already empirically verify in the contemporary moment. While Solnit's victims were responding to specific, isolated disasters—a single earthquake, a once-in-a-lifetime hurricane—in the increasingly unstable and precarious near future, climatological disasters will create cascades of positive feedback loops, spawning new unpredictable disasters, and any kind of disaster communism or utopianism will need to develop the tools to survive these, and these tools will have to be flexible and adaptable. In Robinson's world, as the citizen narrator declaims at the end of the novel, his characters must get over their "childlike Rocky Mountain desire for a happy ending, because it doesn't exist . . . down there in Antarctica . . . the next buttress of the buttress could go at any time."[60] Similarly, in our present, the world-altering disaster of climate change cannot be stopped through utopian interventions—it has already started, and the existential violence that the capitalist profit motive has enacted upon the climate and planetary ecosystems means there is already no going back to an antediluvian time.

Last, while these disaster commons are permanently precarious and always needing to adapt to changing conditions, they are all a part of vast overarching networks of organizational support, solidarity, and care—cooperatives, unions, mutual aid societies, intersectional alliances. Solnit's disaster utopias were contained in a single disaster-struck city or region, and thus rarely had larger support systems upon which to rely when neoliberal crisis returned; in the world of *New York 2140*, neoliberalism is disintegrating everywhere at once under the weight of climatological disaster and its own overambitious desire to make profit out of commons socialities, and is thus in no state to regain control of the spaces where it has lost ground. In its place, disaster commons are able to link up into larger systems. Further work on utopian socialities in literature might consider such systems as related to Murray Bookchin's concept of *confederal autonomous municipalities*, in which the state is replaced "by a confederal network of municipal assemblies; the corporate economy reduced to a truly political economy in which municipalities, interacting with each other economically as well as politically, will resolve their material problems as citizen bodies in open assemblies."[61]

To return to Levitas's qualification about *New York 2140*, I argue that it is fundamentally a utopian text—utopian not because it provides its readers

with a fully realized political system that is radically different from our own (indeed, it does not), but because it performs hermeneutic work that is even more useful and rewarding, presenting a hopeful vision of a precarious, risky, but ultimately utopian future which is won as a consequence of the same battles that activists and occupiers all over the world are fighting right now. It is a utopia because the characters who are creating it have all come to the utopian realization that the only lasting way to survive a time of ongoing planetary destruction is to forge radical, accessible, and sustainable communities of mutual support, care, and joy that may never be utopian *enough*, but which will always, necessarily, *continue becoming more utopian*. Or, as Robinson himself has recently put it: "If dystopia helps to scare us into working harder on that project, which maybe it does, then fine: dystopia. But always in service to the main project, which is utopia."[62]

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Notes

1. Kim Stanley Robinson, *New York 2140* (London: Orbit, 2017), 140, 279.
2. Kim Stanley Robinson, "There Is No Planet B," *Sierra Club*, December 18, 2018, https://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/2019-1-january-february/feature/there-no-planet-b-kim-stanley-robinson.
3. Joshua Rothman, "Kim Stanley Robinson's Latest Novel Imagines Life in an Underwater New York," *New Yorker*, April 27, 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/kim-stanley-robinsons-latest-novel-imagines-life-in-an-underwater-new-york; Gerry Canavan, "Utopia in the Time of Trump," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, March 11, 2017, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/utopia-in-the-time-of-trump/; Brent Ryan Bellamy, "Science Fiction and the Climate Crisis," *Science Fiction Studies* 45, no. 3 (2018): 418.
4. Robinson, "There Is No Planet B."
5. Robinson describes himself as America's "last utopian" here: Adam Rogers, "The Sci-Fi Novelist Who Writes Like the Past to Warn of the Future," *Wired*, October 22, 2018. https://www.wired.com/story/kim-stanley-robinson-red-moon/.

6. Canavan, "Utopia in the Time of Trump."

7. See Margaret Thatcher, "Resisting the Utopian Impulse," *Hudson Institute*, 1999, https://www.hudson.org/research/1266-resisting-the-utopian-impulse; Karl R. Popper, "Utopia and Violence," *World Affairs* 149, no. 1 (1986): 3–9.

8. Kim Stanley Robinson, *Pacific Edge* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 2013), 95.

9. Lyman Tower Sargent, "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," *Utopian Studies* 5, no. 1 (1994): 9–10. In a significant monograph that has influenced the work of Ruth Levitas and other utopian theorists, literary critic Tom Moylan extends Sargent's definition further, delimiting a canon of 1970s sf texts as "critical utopias" that critique not only the societies of their authors, but the idea of perfectible society *tout court*. See Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*, ed. Raffaella Baccolini (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014).

10. Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 18–19.

11. Robinson, *New York 2140*, 139, 140–41.

12. Ibid., 259.

13. Ibid., 144.

14. Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 176.

15. Robinson, *New York 2140*, 119. As unlikely as it sounds, recent legal rulings in the United Kingdom and the United States have indeed supported the right for beaches to be categorized as commons. See On the Commons, "Who Owns the Beach?," *On the Commons*, October 12, 2005, http://www.onthecommons.org/who-owns-beach; David Hart, "Supreme Court—The Right to Be on the Beach,' *UK Human Rights Blog*, February 25, 2015, https://ukhumanrightsblog.com/2015/02/25/supreme-court-the-right-to-be-on-the-beach/.

16. Robinson's "Hurricane Fyodor" is a conscious evocation of Hurricane Sandy, which heavily damaged New York in 2012 and features in a number of other contemporary urban novels, such as *10:04* by Ben Lerner (New York: Faber and Faber, 2014) and *MacArthur Park* by Andrew Durbin (New York: Nightboat, 2017). In both these novels, and in *New York 2140*, the effects of the hurricane are not simply physical, but extend metaphorically, creating liminal subjectivities, generating new ways of life, and undoing old systems.

17. *New York 2140* came out only a few months after the catastrophic fire in the Grenfell Tower council estate in London, and the calls by Robinson's protagonists to reclaim the unoccupied luxury apartments in the north of Manhattan is strongly reminiscent of arguments in the wake of the fire by Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and others to house the refugees of Grenfell in the many "land banking" mansions in the borough of Kensington and Chelsea, as well as the successful occupation by migrants of mansions in that borough in Mohsin Hamid's novel *Exit West* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2017). See, for example, Oscar Berglund, "Using Empty Luxury Homes to House Grenfell Tower Victims Is a No Brainer," *The Conversation*, June 26, 2017, http://theconversation.com/using-empty-luxury-homes-to-house-grenfell-tower-victims-is-a-no-brainer-80025.

18. A large critical field has already developed around climate change and ecological disaster fiction. The term "cli-fi" was coined in 2008 by academic and journalist Dan

Bloom. For wide-ranging reviews of the genre see, in particular, Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow, "Cli-Fi: Birth of a Genre," *Dissent* 60, no. 3 (2013): 58–61; Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015); Adeline Johns-Putra, "Climate Change in Literature and Literary Studies: From Cli-Fi, Climate Change Theater and Ecopoetry to Ecocriticism and Climate Change Criticism," *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 7, no. 2 (2016): 266–82.

19. Robinson, *New York 2140*, 34.

20. Ruth Levitas, "Where There Is No Vision, the People Perish: A Utopian Ethic for a Transformed Future," *CUSP*, Ethics of Sustainable Prosperity series, no. 5 (2017): 4.

21. Rebecca Evans, "Fantastic Futures? Cli-Fi, Climate Justice, and Queer Futurity," *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities* 4, nos. 2–3 (2017): 95.

22. Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* (New York: Viking, 2009), 5.

23. As Solnit notes, rumors of mass violence and looting reported by news media in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, which were, needless to say, fueled by racist characterizations of working-class African Americans, were later found to be greatly exaggerated and, in many instances, fabricated. See ibid., 1–2; Mark Guarino, "Misleading Reports of Lawlessness After Katrina Worsened Crisis, Officials Say," *The Guardian*, August 16, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/aug/16/hurricane-katrina-new-orleans-looting-violence-misleading-reports.

24. Charles E. Fritz, "Disasters and Mental Health: Therapeutic Principles Drawn from Disaster Studies," Historical and Comparative Disaster Series 10, Disaster Research Center, University of Delaware, Newark, 1996, 10, http://udspace.udel.edu/handle/19716/1325.

25. Fritz, "Disasters and Mental Health," 19, 23; Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell*, 3.

26. Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell*, 7, 9.

27. Fritz, "Disasters and Mental Health," 24.

28. Ibid., 53.

29. Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell*, 7, 16.

30. Solnit describes in analytical and exacting detail the numerous instances where the US government and its contractors allowed working-class and African American people to die, or murdered them, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. See ibid., 231–64.

31. Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 8.

32. Joseph Alois Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (London: Routledge, 2003), 83.

33. Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, 6.

34. Robinson, *New York 2140*, 118.

35. For more on Robinson's use of scientific data in his research for *New York 2140*, see Lee Billings and Kim Stanley Robinson, "Q&A: Kim Stanley Robinson Explains How He Flooded Manhattan," *Scientific American*, March 13, 2017, https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/q-a-kim-stanley-robinson-explains-how-he-flooded-manhattan/.

36. Isabell Lorey, *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious* (London: Verso, 2015), 19–20.

37. Lorey, *State of Insecurity*, 1. See also: Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (London: Penguin Books, 2010).

38. Jones's adaptation of Klein's concept within a Leftist social movement framework produces a powerful set of tactics for responding to crises in embodied, reactive, and emancipatory ways which can generate lasting social change. See Graham Jones, *The Shock Doctrine of the Left* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018).

39. Out of the Woods, "The Uses of Disaster," *Commune*, October 22, 2018, https://communemag.com/the-uses-of-disaster; Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009); Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

40. Fredric Jameson, "Future City," *New Left Review* 21 (2003): 76.

41. Out of the Woods, "The Uses of Disaster."

42. Kim Stanley Robinson, "Dystopias Now," *Commune*, November 2, 2018, https://communemag.com/dystopias-now.

43. Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 111; see also Ernst Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, 3 vols., Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 1:150.

44. Out of the Woods, "The Uses of Disaster."

45. Robinson, *New York 2140*, 378.

46. Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 47; Haraway notes that as far as she is aware, the term "Capitalocene" originated with Andreas Malm, who has written extensively on the subject. See Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam-Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso, 2016).

47. Robinson, "Dystopias Now."

48. Robinson, *New York 2140*, 51, 209.

49. See: Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014).

50. Robinson, *New York 2140*, 603–4.

51. For Jameson on universal conscription, see Fredric Jameson, *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army* (London: Verso, 2016).

52. Robinson, *New York 2140*, 540–41.

53. Ibid., 612.

54. Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, 3:1063.

55. Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, 41–42, 55.

56. David M. Bell, *Rethinking Utopia: Place, Power, Affect* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 107, 108.

57. Robinson, *New York 2140*, 612, 613.

58. Out of the Woods, "The Uses of Disaster."

59. Sophie Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism against Family* (London: Verso, 2019), 151.

60. Robinson, *New York 2140*, 604.

61. Murray Bookchin, *Urbanization Without Cities: The Rise and Decline of Citizenship* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1992), 286.

62. Robinson, "Dystopias Now."

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