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It Gets Wetter

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It Gets Wetter

Abstract

It's a novel scene—New York City, 123 years from now: half-drowned but not out. Still a capital of real estate, still a political powerhouse, still an unequal battleground between finance and housing movements, still a crucible where capitalism and climate politics are smashed, melted, and twisted together. The (true) physical premise is that upper Manhattan is fifty feet higher than lower Manhattan.

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It Gets Wetter

[Daniel Aldana Cohen](#) ■ [Summer 2017](#)



In Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140*, "New York is only half-drowned." Above, the Manhattan skyline a few days after Hurricane Sandy (Reeve Joliffe / Flickr)

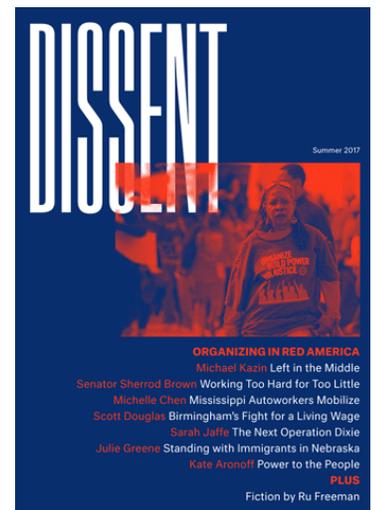
It's a novel scene—New York City, 123 years from now: half-drowned but not out. Still a capital of real estate, still a political powerhouse, still an unequal battleground between finance and housing movements, still a crucible where capitalism and climate politics are smashed, melted, and twisted together. The (true) physical premise is that upper Manhattan is fifty feet higher than lower Manhattan.

With sea levels fifty-eight feet higher than today, after two "pulses" of catastrophic, rapidly rising waters, the island's bottom half is submerged. The water has climbed three stories. At low tide, there's "a green bathtub ring on every building" in the still inhabited "intertidal" zone. Wall Street, Soho, Chelsea, Madison Square—each is uniquely and dramatically changed. (Some even for the better: the drowned High Line has become an oyster bed.) Many buildings stand tall. Others lean and crumble.

Property rights and values are uncertain. But scrappy New Yorkers are rebuilding in this intertidal realm and some now call it SuperVenice. After years of suffering, things are getting fun again. Pumped by an "Intertidal Property Pricing Index," a financial bubble is swelling. And shadowy real-estate titans are scheming to buy up the reclaimed community from the residents who fought to restore it. (Sound familiar?)

In the meantime, life rolls on. Commuters speed-walk to work in diagonal and perpendicular skybridges between buildings. A zip line connects downtown Brooklyn to the southern tower of the Brooklyn bridge. In a stretch of midtown along Sixth Avenue, kids "skimboard" on a shallow, rising tide of water, "jockeying for position on the surges, doing spinners if possible, curb turns."

The banality, thrills, and tensions of wet living aren't for New York alone. These spaces of geophysical, legal, and financial ambivalence are rippling through the world's



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coastal cities (though the narrative sticks to NYC). It's an image of what's coming that refuses climate politics' typical binary between victory or catastrophe, salvation or ruin.

As an image of a climate-changed world, the metaphor of the intertidal, a "zone of uncertainty and doubt, space of risk and reward," is the great gift of Kim Stanley Robinson's new novel *New York 2140*. It's a hulking 600-page feast of a wounded, stubborn city teeming with broken hearts, young idealists, wizened pros, resilient 1-percenters, scrappy orphans, advanced tech, and revolutionary passion. (Even the epigraphs are epic.) And it's an eventful feast. After a methodical, satisfying build, the last quarter of the book is tasteful disaster porn woven into a fast-paced political thriller.

This book falls into the emerging genre of "cli-fi": science fiction about climate change. But for a contribution to this apocalyptic genre, it's weirdly encouraging. We can lose a lot and still come out ahead, Robinson insists. Really, though?

I'll guiltily admit that this is my first Kim Stanley Robinson book. I was never a real sci-fi fan. When I fell in love with *Star Trek: The Next Generation* as a kid in Toronto—where we learned about climate change in grade five—I just wanted more of the same: *Star Trek* books, other *Star Trek* series, the model space ships. And I took it seriously: *Star Trek* wasn't some fun alternative universe, it was the likely future of this one. Today's political conundrums tomorrow! But with Klingons and without capitalism.

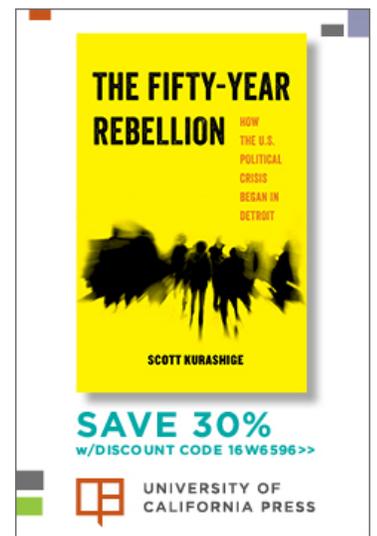
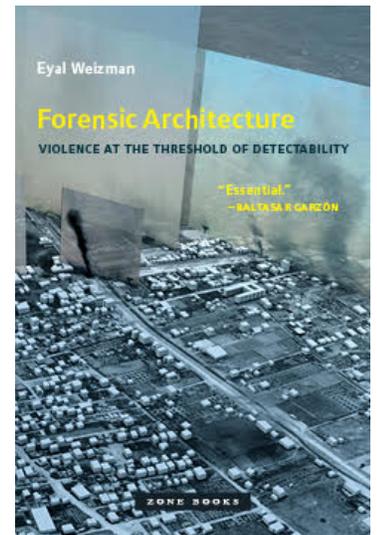
I still remember when my mother dented my illusion. I was patiently explaining to her how starships would be able to fly far faster than the speed of light thanks to "warp drive," reciting long passages from my dog-eared *Technical Manual (Enterprise D)*. "Daniel," she said. "It's just words."

That was a hard day.

Now my obsession with all things climate change, and my emancipation from the Trekkie warp bubble, has given me an excuse to get back into sci-fi. But mainly *cli-fi*. It's a thrilling genre, a way to explore climate futures, their politics, and their everyday life in a way that's less dry or restricted than the usual academic and policy grind (my day job). But there's also a cost to *cli-fi*'s relentless dissections of the coming disaster.

When I watch even good *cli-fi*, like *Incorporated* (produced in 2016 by Matt Damon and Ben Affleck) on TV, or the cult hit *Snowpiercer* (2013) in the movie theater, or when I read the inventive and lyrical novel *Gold Fame Citrus* (2015), by Claire Vaye Watkins, I sense an underlying formula: climate change is going to be gruesome. We are, essentially, doomed. But! Fear not. Even while everything falls apart, compelling protagonists will take brave risks for love (or, in *Snowpiercer*, for Lenin). Yay!

Even *cli-fi* and fantasy writer Paolo Bacigalupi's brilliant novels *The Windup Girl* (2009) and *The Water Knife* (2015), partly fit the pattern, although his imagined worlds are especially subtle and rich, and their futures less certain. What makes the better stuff better is that it's stylish and clever: the mash-up of the Monsanto and Apple corporate nightmares in *Incorporated*; the mathematical communism of *Snowpiercer*; the radiation-hot sand-dune mysticism of *Gold Fame Citrus*; Bacigalupi's blend of charismatic cynicism and socio-political detail.



Democratiya

The journal *Democratiya* was launched in 2005. Sixteen issues, one book, and a quarter-million readers later, *Democratiya* was incorporated into *Dissent*.

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DEMOCRATIYA

What's usually missing is surprise. If ultimately the moral of these stories is, "The climate models are right! Corporations are killing us! Act Now!" it also feels like, "I know, I know. Nice twist, though."

Fictional dystopias derive their subversive power from revelation. The classics jolted and invigorated readers (or at least they used to) with a frightening image of what lurks around the corner. Now, it's harder to get a rise. Climate doom is already the numbing common sense of my generation.

Take *Snowpiercer*, beloved for its supposed frankness. Its premise is that, confronted with global warming, governments pumped sulphur into the sky to block some sunlight. But they went too far, freezing the world into a ball of snow and ice. A microcosm of capitalist society survives on a single train traveling on an endless loop. "Yup," your friend nods. "Tell me something I don't know." Sure, it's eventually revealed that the masses' protein bars are made up of ground cockroaches. But if you read the news, or even just watch music videos, you can't pretend to be scandalized. (And today, in the right deli, you can buy one for yourself.)

In contrast, the sort-of subversive, modestly fresh message of *New York 2140* is precisely its inbetweenness, its pretty good cheer. How many times did I smirk while reading it, muttering, "Please, it's going to be so much worse than that"? (Spoiler: many times.) There's even a comforting, almost painful lack of glamour in its slow-bore realism. It's not totally implausible. (The science bears Robinson out: we're not remotely doomed yet.) The story leaves us space to breathe.

To be clear: I'm no fan of chirpy hope talk. But I can also admit that I prefer some hope to none at all. Giving up sucks. I wake up every morning feeling good about our chances at beating the worst of climate change. It's just a better way to start the day.

As critic and environmental writer Rebecca Solnit has written, hope doesn't have to mean self-delusion or blind optimism. It can be a positive, forward-looking take on uncertainty. It's the kind of hope that refuses both dystopia and utopia. Robinson insists on this, too.

In one scene of *New York 2140*, two lefties, also former financial engineers, are locked up and alone. Jeff is sick. He asks his friend Mutt to tell him "a story I can believe." To lift Jeff's spirits, Mutt starts a tale about a New York of harmonious equals. "Utopia?" Jeff asks. Mutt soldiers on: "Every single element of this land, right down to the bedrock, was a citizen of the community they all made together, and they all had legal standing, and they all made a good living . . . Hey, Jeff? Jeff?" But Jeff was snoring: "The story had put him to sleep. A kind of lullaby . . . a story for children."

Robinson is more interested in the practical problems of economics and politics. On page five, he lays out the basics: "So look, the problem is capitalism." Later, characters debate former Federal Reserve Chair Ben Bernanke's 2008 response to the financial crisis. A celebrity conservationist has a live, on-air epiphany, telling her audience: "[A]ll of you should join the Householders' Union, like today. Check it out, look into it, and join. Because we need to organize, people." The plot turns.

New York is only *half*-drowned. Things could go either way. Politics decides.

It's not just organizing that sustains hope, though. There's also good old-fashioned ingenuity, portrayed in a series of straight-face tech references—"graphene skyscrapers," "diamond spray," "fauxfascia," carbon-sequestering building materials,

biomimicry, even the de-extinction of woolly mammoths. And Robinson's right: without a ton of new tech, we truly are doomed. Sorry, Mum: science fiction isn't all "just words."

The problem remains capitalism. And so the overall portrait of twenty-second-century New York is a touch less optimistic but a lot more convincing than the ones that think tanks and universities have been painting since Hurricane Sandy. It almost feels real. One night in April, as I finished the book up on a roof in Philadelphia, where I now live, I pulled my head back and it was like I was closing a telescope that I had pointed a little bit north, and twelve decades into the future. It would have felt even more surreal if I'd been reading in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, where I'd camped with a friend during Hurricane Sandy, after fleeing my flood-zone apartment in Long Island City. Or not surreal enough.

If there's a problem with *New York 2140* as a story about climate change and New York, it's that the projection is a bit too smooth. Too much past leaks into the future. There are allusions to an intense nightlife in subterranean Chelsea bars in the intertidal zone. Robinson tells us that it's a space of strange pleasures, perversities, gender fluidity. Then he moves us right along, practically saying, "Nothing to see here."

Come on. The conventionally straight, cis future of romance, friendship, even just everyday life dramatized in the book is one of its least charming vintage qualities. The novel's central metaphor is liquidity! Is it so hard to project that sex and selfhood in a semi-apocalyptic, watery New York might get a little freakier?

During the People's Climate March in New York, a Queers for the Climate group started the hashtag #itgetswetter. Their point: massive, bustling coastal cities (also, resort islands) are where queer cultures have exploded. In your typical dystopia, authorities would clamp down viciously on "deviant" communities. But in Robinson's wet cosmopolis, I'd expect more freedom and risk.

New York 2140 is also prudish in its treatment of violence, which it mostly relegates to the background. As an unnamed narrator says about the bloody chaos that followed intense flooding, "We won't go there now, that's pessimistic boo-hooing and giving-upness." When I think through the geopolitics of fifty-eight feet of sea level rise, I see a lot of streaming blood and steaming ash. Certainly the armies and spy agencies of the world are planning for war.

Maybe I was too hard earlier on most cli-fi's obsession with landscapes of destruction. Climate violence is real and will probably spread. How can we think about it in "intertidal" terms?

You could do worse than watching the Norwegian TV series *Occupied*. (The first season premiered in 2015 and the second should land in October.) The show doesn't just showcase gorgeous Scandinavian interiors. (In retrospect, it's kind of shocking that the interior decorating in *Star Trek's* twenty-fourth-century spaceships was so inefficient and drab.) *Occupied* portrays Russia's creeping, increasingly brutal occupation of Norway after its new government announces it's going zero-carbon. Russia comes to reboot the oil wells, but it starts and builds slowly. Politically and psychologically, the occupation is an ever-shifting space of "uncertainty and doubt . . . risk and reward," much like Robinson's Lower Manhattan.

The Norwegian characters, confronting the slow takeover of their country, find themselves making life-or-death decisions in this confusing context. The hard moral question becomes, whom should a person kill? The prime minister, fearing massacres and civil war, struggles to accommodate his new Russian “advisors” and flails before hard choices. A handsome young member of his secret service, trained to preserve order, first goes along with his boss, then wobbles between sides. A restaurant owner suspects that the new Russian customers who save her business have also killed her partner. Her teenage son is already revolting. Enough about wind turbines, the show screams. In a warming world, power will keep bursting from the barrel of a gun.

We should also remember the intimate, subtle climate violence that’s close to home, that’s already started, and that increasingly haunts literary fiction about everyday life in the present. The concerns of cli-fi and culture in general are merging.

I’m thinking in particular about two Jesmyn Ward books that don’t seem to be about climate change. They’re set in and around De Lisle, Mississippi. *Salvage the Bones* (2011) is a novel that unfolds in the days before and during Hurricane Katrina. *Men We Reaped* (2013) is a memoir about the deaths of young black men that Ward grew up with, which alternates between limpid sociological analysis and lush remembrance. Both are stories about black struggle in a beautiful, intertidal corner of the Gulf Coast. It’s a claustrophobic space increasingly ravaged by climate change, although not by that name.

As in *New York 2140*, there’s a visceral, in-between quality to Ward’s texts. The scene isn’t slickly half-drowned, like Robinson’s New York, but sticky everywhere. This is what climate change feels like, in good times and bad.

In Ward’s prose, sweat is everything. In *Salvage the Bones*, basketball players’ bodies, the protagonist’s tank top, a close friend’s rag, and another’s bald head all drip with sweat. Sweat transmits erotic ambition: “I glanced at his face, the sweat like glaze. My lips were open. Another me would’ve licked it off, and it would’ve tasted like salt.” Sweat transmits erotic anguish: “My sweat is making the backs of my thighs slick; I am sliding along the metal like mud gone downhill in a bad rain, coming to a slow sticky stop on Marquise’s back.”

In *Men We Reaped*, sweat is mysterious: “His skin was wet: the night was so hot I didn’t know if it was sweat or tears.” Sweat wraps death: “I imagine these White men wearing white shirts and dark pants, their hair lanky and sweaty, their guns cool in their moist hands.” Sweat survives death: as Ward lists the objects her dead friend Demond left behind, she imagines “his Timberland boots, still smelling faintly of the sweat of his feet.” And sweat is joyful: “He laughed, shook his head, sweat streaming down his face, his hair turning wiry and golden at the root, giving him the blond halo Joshua’d had when we were children.”

I read the sweat in Ward’s writing as more than metaphor. It’s the human ooze of our warming world. Heat and sweat are glorious; they’ve always been with us. But their danger will grow more intense. Heat and humidity have already increased markedly across the United States since 1970. More is coming. Take Climate Central’s projections for the city of Gulfport, at the edge of where Ward’s stories unfold. Gulfport will by 2050 see ninety-four more days of 105 degrees Fahrenheit per year—heat plus humidity—than it did in 2000. (The National Weather Service calls this threshold dangerous to human health.)

By 2050, lucky waterside New York will experience just twenty-eight such danger days each year. That’s still more than five times the number in 2000. Heat waves

already kill more Americans than any other kind of natural disaster. All kill black and brown people more readily. Ward's work is a gripping study of how race, class, and gender structure the violence that global warming is magnifying.

Sex, death, and climate change squeeze between our pores. Before the flood, fire.

So yes, the future of *New York 2140* is a bit vanilla as fantasies go. Still, a dash of vanilla can be refreshing. We need to hold on to work on violence and destruction. But we also need access to scientifically and socially plausible stories about our climate future that aren't Al Gore-cheesy or unrelentingly grim.

We'll be fighting to prevent runaway climate change for a hundred years, and dealing with its effects for thousands. There's no struggle for social justice that's not also a climate struggle. Already. And that's daunting as hell. Personally, I find it easier to deal when I can visualize victories alongside defeats. Small wins count too.

No matter what the earth system's tipping points ultimately are, every fraction of a degree of warming that we avoid means saving millions of lives—people who could play in the cities where, we hope, we'll have killed the patriarchy dead. Every inch of sea level rise that we avert keeps that much more of New York—and Miami, and Shanghai, and Dhaka, and Ho Chi Minh City—from crumbling. Each extra ton of fossil fuel that we keep in the ground means more homes near water's edge will stay upright. Each unit of energy that we never use, because we organize our cities more fairly and efficiently, buys us time to build smarter infrastructure, cleaner energy. And as we race to stay safe, the fight against racism becomes a fight against eco-apartheid.

Every bit of victory is worth winning. That's how I see Antonio Gramsci's "war of position" in the twenty-first-century: carbon trench war. From each dug-in position, the chance for a sudden surge forward. We don't know when that moment comes. But we fight stubbornly until it does, so that we're ready. To keep up our spirits, we share stories: about flashes of heroism and about long uncertain living, about liquid dangers and warm pleasures.

Daniel Aldana Cohen is an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, where he directs the Socio-Spatial Carbon Collaborative, or (SC)².

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