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Capitalocene Imaginations: Settler Colonialism, Capitalism, and the Environmental Crisis in Twenty-First-Century U.S. Literature

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Capitalocene Imaginations:
Settler Colonialism, Capitalism, and the Environmental Crisis
in Twenty-First-Century U.S. Literature

An Honors Thesis presented by
Zoe Pellegrino
to the Department of English
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This thesis is a love letter to the gentle beauty and peace of the natural world and a resounding resistance to the settler colonial and capitalist histories that catalyzed our environmental crisis.

Abstract

This thesis, a study of climate fiction novels and Indigenous knowledge and poetry, argues that these texts use the power of imagination to open up alternative possibilities, otherwise foreclosed by the ideological hegemony of the capitalist climate crisis. I first explore the United States' settler colonial history, and how the perpetuation of settler ideology over time justified the exploitative values of the capitalist system, resulting in the slow violence of our environmental crisis.

The central texts explored in this thesis are the climate fiction novels Chang-rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* and *The Ministry for the Future* by Kim Stanley Robinson, and Joy Harjo's poem "Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings." All of these texts were published in the United States between 2013 and 2020. Both novels I've chosen imagine a world ruled by institutional power and profit. My analysis begins to identify and define an emerging genre of institutional and bureaucratic fiction, which explores the impact of these things on our world.

By combining paradigms from three fields—literature, sociology, and environmental science—this thesis offers several findings about the ability of climate fiction and Indigenous poetry to help us better understand the relationship between settler colonialism, capitalism, and the environmental crisis, and how to imagine a world beyond them.

Although climate fiction and poetry have not reached the mass public yet, many of these texts have the capacity to serve as vehicles for radical imagination if given adequate attention. By examining authors' ability to speculate on the future, I identify the literary innovation and ideological invention that these texts create.

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“Books aren’t just commodities; the profit motive is often in conflict with the aims of art. We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art, and very often in our art, the art of words.”

— Ursula K. Le Guin, 2014, National Book Foundation Medal Acceptance Speech

“The revolution that counts is the one that takes place in the imagination; many kinds of change issue forth thereafter, some gradual and subtle, some dramatic and conflict-ridden—which is to say that revolution doesn’t necessarily look like revolution.”

— Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark*

Chapter One: U.S. History and Theoretical Context

U.S. History and the Ideology of Empire

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, white European men crossed the Atlantic Ocean in search of land to conquer and profit to be made. After arriving on the east coast of North America, British settler colonists saw that the location had potential for both agriculture and maritime trade, resulting in the violent eviction of most Indigenous people east of the Appalachians and the growth of the British Empire. On July 4, 1776, the thirteen colonies declared independence from Great Britain, and the land became known as the United States of America. Following the conclusion of the Revolutionary War, in 1781, the settler colonists pushed further westward. This domination was justified through Manifest Destiny, “the doctrine or belief that the expansion of the United States throughout the American continents was both justified and inevitable” (*OED*). Essentially, the colonists believed that conquering land and spreading their “civilized” values was destined by a higher power, which justified imperialist expansion “from sea to shining sea.” While Indigenous communities and some of the general public questioned the “destined” nature of expansion, these groups lacked the capacity to stop the colonists. As the nation grew in both size and strength, individual states began to elect their own governmental bodies, bulldozing over Indigenous laws with the ideological frameworks of white supremacy and patriarchy. In effect, the North American settler republic became an empire, conquering and swallowing up more land and people over time. However, the settlers’ delusional ideology pretended otherwise.

In *The German Ideology*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels explain that society’s elites not only “rule as a class and determine the extent and compass of an historical epoch...[they] rule

also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of ideas (Marx and Engels 59). The wording of “rule also” highlights the fact that the ruling class not only seeks to oppress all other classes in order to maintain dominance, but also introduces ideology that justifies and legitimates their hoarding of power. Once widely believed, this set of ideas becomes embedded within the fabric of society, unconsciously convincing everyone that this hierarchical organization is both good for society and part of the normal and inevitable operations of everyday life. As Thomas Piketty writes in *Capital and Ideology*, “Every human society needs to justify its inequalities, and every justification contains its share of truth and exaggeration, boldness and cowardice, idealism and self-interest” (Piketty 2). In the case of the European settler colonization of North America, the colonists’ actions were neither cowardly nor brave; they had a vision of power and profit and took every action considered necessary to achieve their goals, regardless of how violent it was.

Environment and Ideology

According to Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore, René Descartes’ conception of “thinking things” vs “extended things” helped influence the exploitation of land and people by constructing a flawed binary between humanity and nature (Patel and Moore 52). The self-interested belief in human exceptionalism positions humanity—specifically white humanity—as more intellectually complex than all other human and non-human species. Ideologists of empire have conveniently used these ideas to justify cheapening and exploiting the category of nature, which came to include not only land, but “virtually all peoples of color, most women, and most people with white skin living in semicolonial regions” (Patel and Moore 51). From the dominant perspective, “These humans were not Human at all. They were regarded as part of Nature, along with trees and soils and rivers—and treated accordingly (*Anthropocene or Capitalocene* 79). Considering

that colonists treated nature as a “free gift” (Patel and Moore 112), it became easy for them to justify conquering and exploiting anything designated within the category of nature, without any expectation to give back. Throughout history, these beliefs have continued to justify ownership over land and people, resulting in dispossession of Indigenous land and exploitation of the earth’s resources.

The social construction of our world through human exceptionalism has proven to be deeply damaging and enduring, emphasizing the idea that humans were put on earth to conquer its land and resources. In a profit-based society, there is little room for the idea that we should take a step back and be grateful for what we have been given. Before the settler colonization of the Americas, Indigenous communities lived a much more balanced and reciprocal relationship with nature, taking only what they needed and giving back what they could in an effort to sustain their resources over time. Colonists quickly transitioned to complete commodification of the land, valuing short-term profit over sustaining long-term existence. Our dominant ideologies prevent people from recognizing the damage that we do because we are socialized to believe that this is the best and only way to organize society. We spoil everything we have because we have been taught to believe that there will always be more resources, and thus, more consequence-free profit. However, as Fred Magdoff and John Bellamy Foster explain in *In What Every*

Environmentalists Need to Know About Capitalism,

Many unintended consequences occur in the production and distribution of goods and services. Mainstream economies call these ‘externalities’; to them, they are side effects of an otherwise rational and socially benign system. They include pollution of water, air, and soil, as well as disparities of wealth, significant periods of high unemployment, and failure to meet the basic needs of all people. They occur because they are excluded from

the structure of economic costs and profits of the system, although they represent social and environmental costs (Magdoff and Foster 39-40).

Although exploiting the natural world for profit appears to be consequence-free from an economic standpoint, this is only because the pollution, wealth inequality, and the failure to equally distribute resources are seen as mere side effects, or “externalities,” of the capitalist system’s functioning. These negative environmental impacts are not written down as costs to be accounted for and are therefore literally external to the process of tracking the flow and growth of capital. Over time, this decision has allowed the problems of over-extraction and pollution to quietly loom in the background, rather than being actively addressed. As a result, production has become cheaper and more efficient, without any consideration for future consequences.

Ultimately, though, these actions are worse for the economy because we will have to quickly imagine expensive reactive solutions to environmental problems as they arise, instead of building preventative measures into the system.

Rob Nixon refers to this failure to adequately address the negative impact on land and people over time as slow violence— “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.” He adds, “Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility” (Nixon 2). Apocalyptic themes and the sensationalization of one-time disasters in the news have shifted people’s understanding of the world to one of immediate and explosive impact, making long-term events much harder to apprehend. In addition, because land exploitation was a founding value of the United States, many people do not see harm against nature as a form of violence. Despite the fact that the violence of the environmental crisis

has unfolded over hundreds of years, it is often depicted as a new issue, or one that is only visible in certain moments in time. For Indigenous communities, who have been impacted by environmental injustice and violence long before the terms even existed, the slow violence of environmental exploitation is impossible to ignore.

Settler Colonialism as Concept

The drive for settler colonization stemmed from the role that land played in European systems of power, specifically that it was the foundation of wealth and control. As white European men and their empires sought out new land, there was a sudden piqued interest in exploring the rest of the world for potential land to conquer, colonize, and settle on. Although these men did not care for the people whose lives they upended, given that they convinced themselves that Indigenous people were closer to nature than humanity, their actions had an immediate and irreversible effect on Indigenous sovereignty. As Lorenzo Veracini writes in *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, “The primary object of settler-colonization is the land itself rather than the surplus value to be derived from mixing native labour with it. Though, in practice, Indigenous labour was indispensable to Europeans, settler-colonization is at base a winner-take-all project whose dominant feature is not exploitation but replacement” (Veracini 8). Essentially, the key feature of settler colonialism is the conquering of land and the removal of the people who lived there first, in order “to establish a better polity, either by setting up an ideal social body or by constituting an exemplary model of social organisation” (Veracini 4).

On arrival, colonizers began to exploit the land and its resources, as their belief in human exceptionalism convinced them that the earth was made chiefly for humans to take from as they pleased. These beliefs have since been preserved through capitalism, which exploits the earth and its resources for profit, despite the consequent and ever-growing environmental crisis. Settler

colonialism was largely made possible by the unquenchable desire to conquer and steal all that the colonizers believed was rightfully theirs, paired with a moral indifference that rendered them unable to recognize any sense of wrongdoing in their actions. As Veracini explains, “Migrants, by definition, move to *another* country and lead diasporic lives, settlers, on the contrary, move to *their* country” (Veracini 3). This passage further emphasizes the settler colonial values of conquest, ownership, and sovereignty, which are made possible through the acts of expulsion and replacement.

Capitalism as Concept

The capitalist system is often associated with greed and wealth, but this is a fundamental oversimplification. While there has always been and forever will be greed, capitalism has not organized society for very long. Over time, the ownership of capital, a type of movable and storable wealth, was discovered to be much more efficient than the ownership of land. As joint stock companies and insurance companies came into being with the growth of maritime empire, it soon became possible to transfer wealth over land and sea. While the capitalist system is facilitated by a set of government rules, the laws governing capital and labor resoundingly favor the growth of capital, making room for wealth inequality and the justification of laborer exploitation. The capitalist system as it exists today allows for and justifies mass hoarding of wealth on scales never known before, as governments back asset owners over anyone who would challenge them. While powerful interests tell us incessantly that capitalism is the best and only way to structure society, a basic understanding of the system’s exploitative design exposes its many careless failures, including its impact on the natural environment. In *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?*, Jason Moore suggests that we view “the rise of capitalism as a new way of organizing nature, and therefore a new way of organizing the relations between work,

reproduction, and the conditions of life... Instead of capitalism as world-economy, we would start to look at capitalism as *world-ecology*” (Moore 85). The *OED* defines “ecology” as “The study of the relationships between people, social groups, and their environment; (also) the system of such relationships in an area of human settlement.” As a result, viewing capitalism as “world-ecology” would allow us to better understand the ways in which it organizes our entire lives, and the fate of our planet, rather than just our financial assets.

Growing up, we are unconsciously socialized through capitalism, as its invisibility permeates our lives in largely unseen ways. Magdoff and Foster explain, “It is capitalism’s ethic, outlook, and internal values that we assimilate and acculturate to as we grow up. Unconsciously, we learn that... [they] are actually good for society” (Magdoff and Foster 38), “making a society organized around goals other than the profit motive unthinkable” (Magdoff and Foster 80). The invisibilization of the dangers of capitalism allows it to be reproduced and perpetuated over time, as we engage in the exploitative labor and consumerism that have come to seem like normal elements of daily life. In part, this unconscious reproduction is achieved by hindering the average citizen’s imaginative ability. The propaganda of the ruling class convinces people that capitalism *is* the way of life, and that any other organizing system would fail to meet our needs, even though capitalism itself is also failing to do so. The difficulty of imagining a world based on values beyond profit is a purposeful manifestation of the system—one that helps secure unethical power structures and keeps many ignorant of their workings. Yet, there are alternatives if we can imagine them.

Anthropocene → Capitalocene

In 2000, Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer proposed the use of the term “anthropocene” to describe our current geological epoch, emphasizing the unconscionable and

largely irreversible consequences of human impact on the Earth (Crutzen and Stoermer 71). While the Anthropocene has no definitive start date, it is most often connected to the Industrial Revolution, given the sudden increase in the burning of fossil fuels and the concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere. While there is logic to this argument, both this date and the choice to place blame on humanity as a whole erases the history of settler colonialism and environmental injustice and allows exploitative systems of power to further elude public consciousness. In “On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene,” Heather Davis and Zoe Todd insist that “the Anthropocene is not a new event but is rather the continuation of practices of dispossession and genocide, coupled with a literal transformation of the environment, that have been at work for the last five hundred years” (Davis and Todd 761). The settler colonial imagination, with its “severing of relations between humans and the soil, between plants and animals, between minerals and our bones” (Davis and Todd 770-771), effectively created the world we live in today, as its exploitative and inequitable hierarchical ideology persists through the functioning of capitalism. Thus, developing a decolonized imagination is integral to our attempts to unmake our world of violence and inequality and create in its place a structure that benefits everyone equitably.

As further productive pushback against the Anthropocene framework, Jason Moore insists that “The Anthropocene makes for an easy story... because it does not challenge the naturalized inequalities, alienation, and violence inscribed in modernity’s strategic relations of power and production... It removes inequality, commodification, imperialism, patriarchy and much more from the problem of humanity in nature” (“The Rise of Cheap Nature” 82). As a result, he suggests that we are instead living in the Capitalocene era. Rather than “the accomplishment of an abstract humanity, the *Anthropos*,” climate change is “*capitalogenic*” —

made by capital (“Name the System!”). By directing attention to the specific system of power that has justified environmental exploitation on a wide scale, Moore invites readers to better understand the history that has caused the environmental crisis while also providing a reference for what needs to be changed in order to halt such exploitation. This framework is a vitally important part of this project, given my aim to make unforgettably visible the daily violence of capitalism that often goes unnoticed.

Literature, Stories, and Radical Imagination; Gratitude and Reciprocity

By design, the capitalist system seeks to limit our capacity for imagination, allowing settler colonial and exploitative ideology to persist through contemporary capitalism. Our future wellbeing depends on more of us beginning to better understand that our current practices will fail to sustain us over time, then learning how to imagine radical alternatives. As Michelle C. Neely explains in *Against Sustainability*, “Our lack of imagination is grounded in the stories Americans tell and are told about our history, which make change seem impossible. If the quintessence of the American dream is capitalist acquisition, if Anglo-Americans’ relationship to land remains one of settler-colonial resource extraction, what hope can we have for change—for a meaningful environmental culture?” (Neely 7). Essentially, the stories we tell and are told about ourselves, and our history, have a significant impact on our ability to imagine what comes next. We must begin by understanding the true violent history of the United States, rather than the sterilized and hegemonically efficacious history we are taught in school and that is often portrayed in popular discourse. We must also learn to understand that change is possible.

The theory of radical imagination is one crucial tool that can help us build a better future. As Alex Khasnabish and Max Haiven explain,

At its most superficial, the radical imagination is the ability to imagine the world, life, and social institutions not as they are but as they might otherwise be. It is the courage and the intelligence to recognize that the world can and should be changed. The radical imagination is not just about dreaming of different futures. It's about bringing those possibilities back from the future to work on the present, to inspire action and new forms of solidarity today (Khasnabish and Haiven)

Radical imagination insists that we must believe in our ability to fundamentally alter systems of power and profit through our minds, which includes not only telling new stories about what we want to see, but also by firmly placing imaginative roots in the future and taking the actions necessary to build towards that reality. As further emphasized by Adrienne Rich in *On Lies, Secrets, Silence: Selected Prose*, “Nothing less than the most radical imagination will carry us beyond this place, beyond the mere struggle for survival, to that lucid recognition of our possibilities which will keep us impatient, and unresigned to mere survival” (Rich). Because the act of imagination is largely an internal and often private process, reading literature can help us better understand the agentic potential of imagining worlds that are in some way removed from our exact present moment or understanding. The work of novelists and poets act as an excellent vehicle for imagination, as we are presented with the author's ideas, then invited to extend, analyze, and imagine them further. In particular, we should pay attention to the works of writers of speculative climate fiction, who imagine future worlds based on our present reality, and Indigenous artists and scholars whose culture, knowledge, and imaginative capacity exist as a fierce counterpoint to settler colonialism and the capitalist profit drive.

In *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things*, Patel and Moore share the story of an Indigenous woman in Spain who “smashed crosses in a church, incited Chichimec Indians to

rebel against the Spanish, and killed a Tarascan Indian using sorcery.” At her court defense she recounted a dream offering “a vision of order and nature contrary to the colonizers,” which was seen as her worst crime. Patel and Moore continue, “The dreamer of this radically different ecology had to be killed, swiftly. To allow her to live would sanction an alternative to capitalism’s world ecology” (Patel and Moore 44). Their analysis emphasizes the pervasiveness of capitalist ideology, as the white patriarchal elite would rather commit murder than allow people the agency of imagining alternatives that pose a threat to hegemonic power. The ruling class clearly views imagination as a dangerous tool, meaning our imagined systems of ideology and power are much more fragile than we think they are. If an idea is radical enough, and it resonates with a large population, we could begin to unravel our history of violence and try to imagine something more equitable as a replacement.

Although powerful interests limit their circulation, the writings of Indigenous peoples and intellectuals, who have been most impacted and burdened by the impacts of capitalism and colonialism, have proposed radically imaginative alternative possibilities for a counter-hegemonic future. For instance, Citizen Potawatomi scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer imagines a world in which gratitude and reciprocity are the main forms of currency, existing entirely outside of and in opposition to the logic of the exploitative frameworks of settler colonialism and capitalism. She asks us to imagine a world in which we view every individual strawberry as a gift from the earth (Kimmerer 25), and every tree, rock, and bear “as our teachers, as holders of knowledge, as guides... as persons worthy of our respect, of inclusion in a peopled world” (Kimmerer 58).

Description of Chapters

Chapter one will explore *On Such a Full Sea*, a 2014 novel in which Chang-rae Lee imagines a temporally ambiguous future world beyond capitalist ruin, in which climate refugees from China are forced to flee to the United States due to uninhabitable levels of pollution and environmental destruction. Through Lee's imagination of a nightmarish manifestation of our complacently capitalist present, the novel ultimately undermines the possibility of current theoretical ideas such as "sustainable capitalism" or other modified versions of our current economic system. In doing so, the novel suggests that, without a fundamental paradigm shift, our future will be grim. This novel invites us to think critically about the institutional power and limits circumscribed by capitalism, and the fundamental need to explicitly recognize the incompatibility of capitalism and a sustainable future. However, because the word "capitalism" is never once explicitly written in the book, as part of Lee's mission to highlight the imaginative limits imposed on the world's inhabitants, some readers may not fully understand the urgent stakes of addressing the destructive nature of the system. This is where my next novel comes in.

In chapter two, I turn to Kim Stanley Robinson's 2020 novel *The Ministry for the Future*. Robinson imagines a future just barely removed from our present, in which a government agency called the Ministry for the Future has been developed to further the goals of the Paris Climate Agreement. With all nations failing to meet Paris Agreement goals, Robinson highlights the overwhelming importance of true accountability and responsibility for destructive actions on an individual and collective scale. Over the course of the novel, Robinson imagines a world that is able to painstakingly draw itself out of the trenches of capitalism and move towards a more equitable and sustaining existence. In order to do this, the novel's inhabitants must transform or overturn the most damaging aspects of capitalism through shifting their focus toward empathy

and local and international collectivity in order to make true climate action possible. Unlike Lee's novel, Robinson delves into the realm of potential hope, with the imagination of economic, political, and scientific innovations and solutions that work towards transforming capitalism and stopping environmental problems at their sources. I will explore how, at the level of both form and content, the novel suggests that it is essential that we first make change at the level of our problematic and destructive systems and institutions, and then figure out how to put radical imagination into practice. *The Ministry for the Future* is the rare cli-fi novel that seriously attempts to end on a note of hope by resisting the exploitation, inequality, and violence of the past and present, seeking to disrupt and get as close as possible to stopping it forever.

While Lee and Robinson's novels do very important imaginative work on the relationship between capitalism and environmental destruction, they fail to take into account Indigenous perspectives, which hold a vital role in the environmental movement and reflect on capitalism and the environment from a decolonial perspective. In order to fill in this gap, I focus on Robin Kimmerer's exploration of Indigenous knowledge through *Braiding Sweetgrass* and Muscogee (Creek) poet Joy Harjo's work, specifically her poems "Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings" and "A Map to the Next World." Harjo's poetry positions itself both completely outside of and in response to the logic of settler colonial capitalism, allowing me to explore what kinds of speculations are possible when the points of origin are decolonial. This perspective relies on the temporal framework within which she writes and imagines, as Indigenous time begins long before the violent disruption of settler colonialism and the implementation of a profit-based system such as capitalism.

Chapter Two: Growth, Profit, and Environmental Exploitation in Chang-rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea*

One of the core values of the capitalist system is achieving unending growth and profit by any means necessary—often by disregarding the economic externality of negative environmental impact and the risks it poses to people and the planet. While living through our anthropogenic environmental crisis, environmental degradation and post-disaster dystopia are becoming increasingly more common threads in both real and imagined societies. *On Such a Full Sea*, a 2014 climate fiction novel by Chang-rae Lee, imagines the immigration story of a post-disaster community from Xixu City, New China. Made uninhabitable by the polluting CO₂ emissions and runoff of farms, factories, transportation, and “around-the-clock coal and rare-earth excavation,” “the town was forced to cease” (Lee 19). Lee writes,

Those who can remember the tales of the old-timers report that in the heydays it was as if the entire valley and everything in it were slowly scorching, all the rubber and plastic and alloys, all of what little real wood remained, all the rotting food and garbage, the welling pools of human and animal wastes, such that in the end it was as though the people themselves were burning, as if from the inside, exuding this rank, throttled breath that foretold of a torturous, lingering demise (Lee 19).

Lee's descriptive language paints a frightening image of devastating anthropogenic impact on humans and the earth, brought about by capitalism's ceaseless exploitative profit drive. Readers can picture a scorched, barren landscape, riddled with the detritus of a society wholly, though never regrettably, reliant on profit. Years of cheapening nature and failing to express care and compassion for people and the planet slowly and torturously led the land and its inhabitants to a

state of dereliction and disrepair. This depiction of Nixon's theory of slow violence serves as a warning for what we could experience if we fail to stop environmental exploitation in its tracks.

One of the most important structural elements of the novel is the fact that it is collectively narrated by the present inhabitants of B-Mor, the community established in Baltimore, Maryland by the original migrants from Xixu City. Primarily, they tell the story of Fan, a teenage girl who makes the shocking decision to traverse beyond B-Mor's border walls. After her boyfriend Reg mysteriously disappears from the community, supposedly snatched away to become a test-subject to aid in increasing the exploitative profit of the pharmacorp, Fan feels little reason to remain. Beyond this, it soon becomes apparent that she is pregnant with Reg's child, which provides an additional motivation to find him. Given the state of the world's exploited and toxic environment, nearly every adult is expected to become afflicted with a "C-illness." When speaking to older family members or residents, it is more common to inquire as to which specific C-illnesses they'd suffered from rather than asking if they are well. In an environment in which one is ingesting toxic chemicals and particles every day, nobody escapes unscathed — "Eventually everyone will express it... Our tainted world looms within us, every one" (Lee 75). However, Reg was rumored to be "C-free." The narrator reflects, "In fact, it's funny that Reg should end up being the one who was so cellularly pure," given his mixed Chinese and African blood. "There was a time—not as long ago as one would like to think—when people of Reg's appearance would have been talked about openly, right in their faces, as if they didn't have eyes or ears" (Lee 78). The discussion of racism and bloodlines is a recurring motif throughout the novel, especially given B-Mor's settler colonial history. Over time, the community became very deeply indoctrinated through the ideals of the directorate, a shadowy ruling body that conveniently rewrote a highly sterilized version of B-Mor's history.

Understanding how slow violence operates in the novel depends upon understanding how it both depicts its own fictional history and real United States history. While present day B-Mors are made to feel proud of their past, they have a very warped idea of what actually happened when the Xixu City migrants were brought to Baltimore, Maryland. The B-Mor narrator explains,

Our predecessors had the unique advantage of being husbanded by one of the federated companies... The originals were brought in en masse for a strict purpose but with their work- and family-centric culture intact, such that they would not only endure and eventually profit the seed investors but also prosper in a manner that would be perpetually regenerative (Lee 22).

Essentially, rather than being welcomed overseas because of compassion and care for a community ravaged by environmental harms, the former inhabitants of Xixu City were brought in as labor migrants by a “federated company,” in hopes that they would unknowingly create a system of perpetually regenerative mass profit through labor and biological reproduction. There is a very cruel irony in being rescued from a profit-induced environmental nightmare only to be thrust into creating a new one, but the originals were so grateful to be alive that they hardly noticed the conditions of their complete commodification and leaned into the excitement of establishing a new community.

In the pursuit of profit, the directorate forced the migrants to engage in settler colonialism, then convinced them that this was justified and necessary to bring stability to an otherwise unstable land. While the present-day B-Mor narrator insists “that there was very little to encounter by way of an indigenous population... [only] smatterings of them...pockets of residents on the outskirts of what is now the heart of B-Mor” (Lee 21), this is a lie-based version

of B-Mor history, which keeps the people of B-Mor from recognizing the need to actively acknowledge their past and take responsibility for working to make things better for themselves and their future generations. In reality, there were

businesses run by the smattering of natives who had stayed on, whose deeds and leases to their properties were unilaterally voided and reassigned to the (then nascent) directorate... this society, barely clinging to life, was still stubbornly doing so, and might have improved itself given the opportunity our originals had to retool and create a B-Mor of their own” (Lee 80).

Essentially, the directorate used Baltimore’s struggle to stay afloat as an excuse to justify stripping the society of their chance to revitalize themselves in order to create a much more profitable labor colony, then fill it with refugee laborers. The cruel irony of this transition is the blissful ignorance of the new B-Mor inhabitants, who are tasked with building the means of their own exploitation. While they feel a certain level of agency in creating this community, they are essentially following orders from the directorate.

The narrator explains, “These days we accept the various legacies of our corpus from the time of the natives and originals right up to now and live together in harmony as long as we don’t linger too much on those legacies, which we have all agreed to do. We don’t want trouble” (Lee 86). Agreeing not to linger on this history allows them to ignore the violence that their ancestors experienced, and the violence that was enacted on the populations that were removed in order to build B-Mor and sustain the other tiers of the novel’s world. In our present United States, the educational system teaches many young children a highly sterilized version of the nation’s history through a white supremacist lens. The European colonists are presented as curious and admirable explorers rather than violent conquerors and rapists. This is one example

of how Lee takes the reality of the present and imagines how it may be extrapolated into the future if we fail to work outside of our current systems of power.

After being “rescued” from a near death, the gratitude of the Xixu City migrants leaves them in a vulnerable state of tunnel vision, in which they cannot see the risks and exploitation of this new situation. As a result, they are easily indoctrinated and convinced of an alternate reality “about how by dint of their collective will and the disciplining of their leaders in keeping everyone focused on the job the originals transformed the desperate nothingness about them” (Lee 79). This so-called “desperate nothingness” was actually home to a community of Black and Brown people who could have revitalized the existing infrastructure if they had been provided with adequate resources instead of being forcefully evicted in the conquest of elite power and profit.

On Such a Full Sea is a peculiar and disorienting piece of allegorical literature that serves to warn us about the complacent perpetuation of exploitative systems of power and the attempted use of “sustainable capitalism.” While set in an ambiguously distant future, many of the core aspects of the novel’s world are extrapolated from our current reality, such as stratified social classes and wealth inequality, the socialized value of labor, and the insistence on using technology to sustain the growth of profit in an environmentally degraded landscape. This temporal gap creates a defamiliarized reading experience that allows us to critically analyze the perpetuation of ideology over time. Although Lee never writes about “capitalism” within the pages of this novel, he does deeply explore its ideology by imagining a world in which people and the land are exploited for profit on nearly every page. Lee’s decision to not explicitly name the system serves to elucidate how the system has so completely indoctrinated us, to the point of becoming invisible.

As Fred Magdoff and John Bellamy Foster explain in *What Every Environmentalist Needs to Know About Capitalism*,

For most of us, capitalism is so much a part of our lives that it is invisible, like the air we breathe. We are as oblivious of it as fish are oblivious of the water in which they swim. It is capitalism's ethic, outlook, and internal values that we assimilate and acculturate to as we grow up. Unconsciously, we learn that greed, exploitation of laborers, and competition (among people, businesses, countries) are not only acceptable but are actually good for society because they help to make our economy function 'efficiently' (Magdoff and Foster 37-38).

This historically perpetuated oblivion makes it particularly challenging for most people to realize that nearly every element of contemporary society is driven by capitalist growth and exploitation, especially in the United States. Our unconscious socialization within capitalism effectively numbs and devalues passion and moral consciousness, transforming the average citizen into nothing more than a cog in the machine of profit production and the ever-increasing wealth gap. Once we understand that most people are not even fully aware of the role of capitalism, and the way we swim in it, it becomes easier to see how these conditions have been perpetuated over time

As a labor colony, B-Mor is one of three tiers of affluence in the novel's society, much like our own. While we have socially constructed lower, middle, and upper classes, Lee's imagined world is home to the labor colonies, the elite and wealthy Charters, and the unregulated open counties. These three distinct categories of wealth and power are marked by geography and border walls. Within this structure, access to resources and levels of production and consumption deviate significantly. For instance, the Charters are dependent on various labor colonies for

imported resources, while the colonies rely on Charters for the funding and profit necessary to maintain their community. Meanwhile, both tiers are specifically taught to fear the open counties, where the lack of routine and institutional control makes this part of society a potentially oppositional threat to hegemonic power and profit.

B-Mor exists to produce fish and produce for the elite and wealthy Charter villages, creating a relationship of seemingly stable reliance. However, the use of new technology as a bandage over environmental problems highlights how production is valued over genuine environmental protection and concern. This can be further explored through Ecological Modernization Theory (EMT), one of the core ideas of environmental sociology, which proposes the idea that capitalism can be altered to function as the solution to anthropogenic climate change and environmental crisis. Through super-industrialization, using capitalist markets and industrial innovation to produce and implement more efficient and environmentally friendly technologies as the primary means for solving ecological problems, proponents of this theory believe we can maintain our current systems of power, while also sustaining the future, by merely adjusting them (Barbosa). EMT's neoliberal approach emphasizes reformation and modernization of the capitalist system, rather than radically challenging it or seeking to end environmental issues at their sources. This approach is problematic for a variety of reasons, but especially because there is no reason to believe that the unsustainable and exploitative system of contemporary capitalism could be restructured to focus on equality. EMT is also criticized for its position as a "techno-fix," using technology to solve our ecological problems instead of taking the necessary step to sacrifice personal and society-wide convenience for the sake of the planet.

In the words of poet and activist Audre Lorde, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will

never enable us to bring about genuine change” (Lorde 112). Capitalism is one master’s tool that has been used to uphold unequal power structures and hoard wealth amongst wealthy elite. Relying on the system that caused the crisis to pull us out of the crisis it has helped create would be extremely foolish. However, the directorate does not seem to care. Two standout examples of ecological modernization in B-Mor are the “first truly uncontaminated grow beds... and the parallel complex of fish tanks” (Lee 21), which seem to simultaneously address and ignore the issues of climate change and environmental toxicity. Throughout this society, food, water, and air are carefully calibrated for safety in a world ravaged by toxins and climate crisis. While basic needs should be protected as human rights, and widely accessible, they are commodified than in our own society. One resident shared, “Do you realize how difficult it is to grow fruits and vegetables outside?... We forget about how ideally engineered our grow facilities are... And all of you now trained from an early age in the techniques of maximized production” (Lee 81). This passage implies the supposed dangers and contamination of outside air and land and the lack of reliable climate for agriculture. The fact that children are trained “in the techniques of maximized production” is also deeply unsettling, but not entirely surprising given the capitalist system’s emphasis on labor.

From the collective narrator’s perspective, “B-Mor works because we work, our sense of purpose driving us that extra measure, that extra hour, and then, of course, the knowledge of what’s out in the counties and what it used to be like here before the originals landed refueling us whenever we flag” (Lee 16). This passage highlights not only the constructed relationship of labor as life’s purpose in B-Mor, but the socialized fear of the counties’ uncertainty, which largely exist outside of systems of power and have immediate access to little more than just the most basic needs. Lee’s use of the word “knowledge” is a noteworthy detail, as it indicates the

complacent acceptance of gained information, given that almost nobody in B-Mor has ever actually seen or experienced life in the open counties for themselves. In a system so significantly predicated on the value of profit production, there is little time or space for imagination. Given the constructed fear of life beyond the walls, the B-Mor community view themselves as a stabilizing force. They explain, “Stability is all here in B-Mor; it’s what we ultimately produce, day by night by day, both what we grow for consumption and how we are organized in neighborhood teams... In this difficult era the most valuable commodity is the unfailing turn of the hours and how they retrieve for us the known harbor of yesterday” (Lee 8). In this context, stability acts as a further inhibitor to freedom and free thinking, including imaginative capacity, when an entire community takes such pride in their own exploited labor because it is all they have ever known. Describing the dependability of time as “the most valuable commodity” signals an acceptance of self-commodification.

Given the deeply indoctrinated value of stability in the B-Mor community, the mere act of Fan’s departure is enough to create a hero out of her. While there are very few confirmed facts about Fan’s journey, her departure gives the community their first real opportunity to imagine the realities of life outside the psychological limitations of their deeply socialized upbringing and the physical limitations of living in a walled-in space. Lee writes, “Fan captured our imagination. The very imagination, to be honest, that never seems terribly vital or necessary when things are going right... For doesn’t B-Mor as conceived and developed and now constituted obviate the need for such purposeful dreaming?” (Lee 37). This passage exemplifies the fact that B-Mor’s labor drive and indoctrination have successfully convinced individuals that they need not dream bigger or imagine something better because the system has proven that it can and will provide everything they need. The B-Mor community only interrogates its relationship with imagination

after Fan takes the leap to exit the walls of B-Mor. This is arguably one of the central goals of capitalism, which turns its laborers into automatons who spend so much time laboring that they necessarily associate it with their sense of self-worth and wellbeing.

Part of capitalism's power is that it makes it almost impossible to imagine being an individual beyond the system, making Fan an almost impossible character. Throughout *On Such a Full Sea*, Fan is heralded as B-Mor's hero and as the catalyst for imagination. While largely a cipher to whom things happen, Fan is given some strength and wherewithal to think freely and make decisions for herself. After stepping beyond the walls of B-Mor, Fan has no real plan or destination, as she has been indoctrinated to not know what lies beyond the walls. We know that she makes the decision to leave, but after that, her journey is left up to the collective B-Mor imagination. Through this speculated story, Fan is reaffirmed as the only character in the book who discovers by doing. While most of her existence is passive, she makes a couple of major decisions that fundamentally alter the given situation.

Although very little is known about Fan's journey at the time of her departure, the B-Mor community is able to gather bits and pieces of information over time. Soon after Fan departs from the gates of B-Mor, she is hit by a car driven by Quig and Loreen—residents of the Smokes, an area of the open counties near Pennsylvania. We see the first real dialogue in the novel between these two characters, but Lee chose not to use quotation marks. Given the growing and changing folklore of Fan's journey, as the story is told and retold throughout B-Mor, this choice was likely made because there is no way to verify the exact dialogue that was shared in this moment, or at any moment throughout the novel. We learn that Quig used to be a Charter veterinarian, before all pets were banned out of fear of illness and injury. After losing his means of earning a living, he and his family resorted to selling leftover pain medication on the

black market, before being caught and banished to the counties. Quig's wife and daughter do not survive the first few days, leaving him forced to discover his own path. After landing in the Smokes, he used his professional skills to start a medical compound. Given the counties' limited resources, Quig would only heal people if they could offer some sort of needed goods or help out in the long run. While life in the open counties is not ruled by capital, it is still largely transactional. Instead of leaving Fan to suffer on the side of the road, he decides to pick her and up and nurse her back to health, hoping for something in return.

When Fan wakes up, finding herself in an unfamiliar place, one of the first things she notices is that "the air was damp but smelled green and fresh with what she didn't yet know was the scent of fresh pines" (Lee 44). During Fan's stay in the counties, she begins to understand the natural world for the first time in her life. After she has healed from the accident, she begins to go on hikes with some of the children in the Smokes. On her first hike, "she was startled by the denseness of the trees, for the school units and evening programs at B-Mor would have you think that the landscape of the open counties was mostly stripped of vegetation and thus devoid of any wildlife... Fan was accustomed to the trees in the parks of B-Mor, every last one of them strategically placed along paved walkways and the hawker-thoroughfare to provide shade" (Lee 92). This passage is particularly striking, as it highlights the fact that nature has no value in B-Mor. While there are some trees, their placement is as regimented as the community's daily laboring. Lee also specifically mentions the trees that are placed along the hawker-throughfare, highlighting the fact that shade was provided for the act of consumption and the exchange of capital for goods. These experiences of free exploration and the appreciation of nature are unknown to most people in the novel's world, as they have never seen beyond the carefully engineered trees, grow beds, and fish tanks.

Although Fan is permitted to stay with Quig and Loreen while she heals, this freedom does not last. One morning, Loreen wakes Fan to inform her that the three of them would be going on a trip to a Charter near the old city of Syracuse, New York. Quig needed a new drilling rig, for the compound, and Loreen needed an expensive medicine for her son, so he contacted one of his wealthy former patients in the Charters (Lee 123). For Fan, “The reason for her presence [on this journey] was a mystery” (Lee 122). “She wanted to ask more questions about why she was accompanying him, but she was both afraid of him and of the reason, the most chilling possibility being that he was intending to sell or barter her” (Lee 124). Fan’s concerns here are completely understandable, as she had previously seen Quig trade away young people around her age.

When the trio arrive at Seneca village, the Charter destination, the guard checked Loreen and Quig’s names and photos, “not bothering with Fan at all, assuming she was either theirs or an offer” (Lee 189). This moment highlights the dispensability and commodification of Asian women, and women of color within the framework of cheap nature. To the guard, Fan hardly even registers as a human. As Quig drives through the village, Fan is amazed by what she sees before her. “In a word, it was beautiful. A bit unusual, yes, with the living and shopping so fully integrated, but beautiful nonetheless... It almost made her feel nauseous, but it wasn’t illness as much as an upending awe, neither exactly good or bad, a state of being she realized she had never experienced back in B-Mor, where routine is the method, and the reason, and the reward” (Lee 190). Growing up and living in an eternally monotonous routine of B-Mor, Fan never had the opportunity to experience awe or amazement. When every hour of the day is so heavily regimented, hardly anything ever comes as a surprise. This is another reason why Fan’s

departure felt like such a revolutionary moment for the community, as they gained access to a feeling that many of them had likely never experienced before.

As Quig pulls up to the home of Mister Leo and Miss Cathy, their Charter hosts, “a petite middle-aged woman in a light gray service woman greeted them. She was clearly expecting them” (Lee 191). Once inside, Loreen quickly instructs Fan to clean herself up and prepare for their very important dinner meeting. After Fan’s shower, Loreen meets her in the bedroom to brush her hair and help her understand her role in Quig and Mister Leo’s business transaction. “You know why you’re here, right? I know you do. You’re not a dumb girl... You’re going to be that woman’s helper. She’ll show you how to take care of the house. You’ll train under her and then someday take over when she retires” (Lee 194). In conversation, Fan learns that Mala, the woman who greeted them at the door, “lived here at the house twenty days in a row, and on the twenty-first she spent the day and night away. The next morning, she returned for another twenty before going away for a full day again. That was the schedule for the last seventeen years” (Lee 200-201). While Mister Leo and Miss Cathy live a life of elitist luxury, they employ Mala to do all of the heavy lifting that allows their home to keep running, pulling them away from her husband and children. On her twenty-first day, she brought the money she had made back to her family to fund her children’s education. This is reminiscent of immigrant women workers traveling to the United States to engage in care work and sending remittances back to their families in order to help them get by at home.

When Miss Cathy walks into the dining room, she asks Mala if “Leo’s people” have arrived yet. She then turns to Fan “and looked at her as blankly as she might be a statuette in a gallery, one that had been there a very long time,” before asking Mala, “Does she speak English?” (Lee 206). This ignorance is yet another instance of Fan’s dehumanization while in

Cathy and Leo's house, but hardly compares to what happens next. A couple of weeks into Fans' stay, Miss Cathy brings her upstairs and says "This is your place now. We'd like to keep you" (Lee 242). Here Fan meets "the Girls," a group of seven young Asian girls who Miss Cathy has claimed ownership over through the practice of "keeping," in which "The Girls were lodged in the same way beloved pets were once kept by their owners" (Lee 267). Stripped of their personal identities, each girl is referred to by the numbers one through seven and had identically altered eyes that made them look more like cute anime characters than humans. They are also forced to live in one enclosed, windowless room, resulting in varying degrees of suffering from "sore joints and fragile bones and periodic bouts of an intense dragging weariness that Fan would later learn were all caused by a lack of sunlight" (Lee 253). Fan is appalled by this reality and, in the following weeks, works to push the girls to rebuild their strength through exercise.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about the room the girls are kept in is that each of the white walls are draped in a storytelling mural that explained their daily experiences in the home. Fan observes, "It was not simply the limits of the room but also their own order that formed them, the expression of which Fan could see played out on the wall. For there was now nothing that *could* happen to them, no new experiences whatsoever save their routine" (Lee 258). As a result, Fan's presence provides something new for the girls, as they express their eagerness to begin adding her story to the wall. This description of the girls also largely mirrors Lee's earlier depiction of B-Mor, as a place ruled by routine and profit, and held together by the assumption that everyone in the community would comply. As Fan and the girls get to know each other better, the girls conclude that "Fan must depart as soon as possible, as there was no more time to waste" (Lee 262). In the following days, the girls attempt experiments to see if one of them falling ill would lead to the door being unlocked and create an opening for Fan to escape. While

the first few attempts only lead to minor illness, they finally have success when Five grew very ill after eating spoiled kidney beans.

After a doctor is called to the home, Dr. Vikram Upendra arrives. Observing his surroundings, he quickly notices that Fan does not seem to belong. He says, “You don’t have to stay here if you aren’t here to keep. You know that, right?” (Lee 276). Here, Dr. Upendra seeks to provide Fan with a way out of this exploitation. While it is at first very difficult to convince Miss Cathy of the importance of bringing the ill girls to the hospital for adequate healthcare, she is ultimately forced to relent. Fan left the house to enter the medical van with them, taking her way out. With nowhere else to go, she asks Dr. Upendra if she can stay with him for the day, and he brings her on a couple of adventures. However, she is still not free.

While the novel attempts to end on a sense of hope by providing Fan with the opportunity to write the next episode of her journey, rather than being swept along with the tide, the so-called hope ultimately fails to be convincing. Lee writes, “But the question now, little one, is where would you like to go? Where indeed. Where would you go dear Fan?” (Lee 406). Barely off the cusp of avoiding being sold to the pharmacorp for profit by her brother, Fan is provided with a chance to go anywhere she’d like. However, she has now spent time in every tier of society and experienced exploitation, danger, and fear. While carrying a growing baby and still missing the love of her life and her child’s father, Fan has no place to truly call home anymore. We don’t know where she decides to go because our narrator does not imagine it for us, but presumably Lee keeps this open-ended in order to evoke a feeling of freedom amidst a tale of exploitation. He writes “A tale, like the universe, they tell us, expands ceaselessly each time you begin to examine it, until there’s finally no telling exactly where it begins, or ends, or where it places you now (Lee 70).

Fan's departure, and all that was learned from it through narrative speculation, provides the people of B-Mor with the realization that there are other options, if they can imagine them. Lee writes, "What hasty preparations we make for our future. Think of it: it seems almost tragic, the things we're sure we ought to bring along. We pack too heavy with what we hope we'll use, and too light of what we must. We thus go forth misladen, ill equipped for the dawn" (Lee 402). This passage reads as a warning, highlighting the lack of time and genuine concern dedicated to preparing ourselves for the future. The success of capitalism is premised on the value of constant labor and instantaneous production and profit, with little concern for later consequences. Most of what we pack relates to the story we already know, rather than the necessities of imagination, empathy, kindness, and gratitude—the tools necessary to write a new story and build a better world. Thus, we must learn how to refuse and subvert the master's tools and imagine a new toolbox for ourselves—one that seeks to unravel us from the throes of capitalism.

Chapter Three: Imagining Our Way Out of Capitalism Through Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*

On December 12, 2015, the Paris Climate Agreement was adopted at the 21st Conference of the Parties, the annual gathering of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). This vital document is a landmark acknowledgement of the life-threatening anthropogenic impacts of climate change on an international scale and established the first global framework for climate action. Its central goals, as outlined in Article 2, include

- a) Holding the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and pursuing efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C
- b) Increasing the ability to adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change and foster climate resilience
- c) Making finance flows consistent with a pathway towards low greenhouse gas emissions and climate-resilient development (*Paris Agreement 3*).

In 2018, the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reported that the difference between 1.5 and 2°C of warming could mean “substantially more poverty, extreme heat, sea level rise, habitat loss, and drought” (NRDC). If we are not able to successfully limit global temperature rise, vulnerable populations and areas of the world will experience unlivable conditions. As such, the Paris Agreement demands that developed countries provide support and financial assistance to developing nations in order to ensure that everyone is provided with the opportunity to adapt and foster resilience. This would also help create climate-positive finance flows, as much of the money in the wealthiest developed nations goes towards the most profitable and most dangerous emitters.

The Agreement's focus on equity and the eradication of poverty through sustainable development highlights the fact that, while climate change impacts all of us, the severity and scope of these impacts are felt disproportionately. The document asserts "*Acknowledging* that climate change is a common concern of humankind, Parties should...respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights, the right to health, the rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, migrants, children, persons with disabilities and people in vulnerable situations and the right to development, as well as gender equality, empowerment of women and intergenerational equity" (*Paris Agreement 2*). This acknowledgement elucidates an awareness of global inequality and vulnerability, highlighting indigenous peoples, migrants, children, and women as groups who are disproportionately impacted by climate change. While this is a bare minimum, it is a crucial consideration in the pursuit of a more equitable and environmentally stable future.

In the time since the Paris Agreement went into effect on November 4, 2016, 197 countries have signed on. However, the existence of this document alone, and the action that has been taken so far, indicate that many people still fundamentally misunderstand the urgency of the climate crisis. Although most people do believe in climate change, many are still apathetic to take action to help force change. By 2020, participating nations were expected to submit long-term plans for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and in 2023, the first global stocktake will take place. Unfortunately, the Agreement is currently failing, as nearly all member nations continue to fall short of their goals. Wealthy developed nations continue to value financial growth over human and nonhuman life, while developing nations lack the resources to implement changes. In the United States, the Paris Agreement has had a fraught history in its short lifetime. While President Barack Obama ensured that the U.S. was an original signatory

nation in 2015, one of the focuses of Donald Trump's disastrous presidential term was rolling back decades of environmental policy. While a Party nation is not considered officially withdrawn until a year after the receipt of their withdrawal notice, this became official on November 4, 2020 (NRDC). Trump's lack of concern for the planet throughout his campaign allowed many people to let their guard down and pulled responsibility away from the U.S., despite its role as one of the wealthiest and most environmentally destructive nations in the world. A shift took place on February 19, 2021, as President Joe Biden rejoined the Paris Agreement as one of his first executive orders. While the U.S. was only officially withdrawn for under than a year, this was a massive step backwards and a profound policy failure with far-reaching global impacts. When truly progressive climate efforts are failing to meet our current needs, it is abhorrent that we still have to fight to convince some people that the threat of climate change exists at all.

Kim Stanley Robinson's 2020 novel, *The Ministry for the Future*, places the Paris Agreement and its brief history at its core and begins to imagine one possibility of what could happen next. Robinson asks: With a failing Paris Agreement, and an increasingly endangered natural world, how might we collectively come together to rethink the role of capital and urgently address our immediate social and environmental needs? Article 14 of the Paris Agreement states that the Conference of the Parties "shall undertake its first global stocktake in 2023 and every five years thereafter...to assess the collective progress towards achieving the purpose of this Agreement and its long-term goals" (Paris Agreement 18). In essence, this means taking stock of each nation's carbon emissions, and comparing this number to the goals it had set. With 2023 quickly approaching, Robinson takes the creative liberty to the findings of COP 29, based on what little progress has been made thus far. He writes, "The first global stocktake

didn't go well. Reporting was inconsistent and incomplete... Very few nations had hit the targets they had set for themselves" (Robinson 15). As a result, at COP 29 in 2024, the Ministry for the Future was created as a "new Subsidiary Body furthermore charged with defending all living creatures present and future who cannot speak for themselves, by promoting their legal standing and physical protection" (Robinson 15). Many people were hopeful that the Ministry would be able to carry out the goals of the Paris Agreement more effectively and efficiently than in past years and better promote and demand compliance. Despite the Agreement's legally binding nature, there are no consequences for failing to meet its goals. As a result, the leaders and wealthy elite of many nations are making the conscious and deeply damaging choice to maximize immediate profit and growth without considering the way this impacts the earth's future generations.

While Chang-rae Lee's 2014 novel, *On Such a Full Sea*, envisions capitalism and the climate crisis as inevitable and enduring, *The Ministry for the Future* upends and debunks common assumptions about our reality. The narrator, clearly aligning with Robinson's own beliefs, explains that ideology is "a cognitive illusion, a kind of necessary fiction. We have to create and employ an ideology to be able to function; and we do that work by way of thinking that is prone to any number of systematic and one might even say factual errors. We have never been rational" (Robinson 88). Because ideologies are structured to normalize power relations, their artificial nature can be recognized. In effect, this highlights the fact that it is possible to get out of ideological constructions that defend and normalize the interests of power hoarders. As such, Robinson works to undercut the credibility of the persistent ideologies of settler colonialism and capitalism, emphasizing that there are other ways, and that we must figure out how to find them in order to save the planet.

The Ministry for the Future is a climate fiction novel that defies and bends the limits of genre. Robinson's writing strays from a typical narrative flow, shifting between omniscient and first-person narration throughout the novel's 106 chapters. While Robinson includes a cast of recurring characters, they are not the central subjects of the novel—the Paris Agreement, the Ministry, and the imagination of a future of climate action are the focus. However, these individuals are important in their representations of the people in our contemporary society who inhabit these specific roles. As Gerry Canavan writes in the LA Review of Books,

We understand, on some level, that we are following Frank May, a deeply traumatized survivor of the Indian heat wave, and Mary Murphy, the chairwoman of the Ministry for the Future, as our two main characters — but Robinson successfully distracts the reader with the Dos Passos method such that when the two wind up in the same place at the same time and begin to interact about one-eighth of the way through the novel, the shock of the tense moment explodes the narrative into an entirely new energy state (Canavan).

The John Dos Passos Method refers to experimental writing techniques and the refusal of the traditional conventions of the novel. For Robinson, this means writing from multiple perspectives, “combining traditional narrative with other prose forms like the encyclopedia article, the think piece, the news report, meeting minutes, the Socratic college seminar, the prose poem, the riddle game, and more” (Canavan). This format allows Robinson to explore ideology, power, and responsibility from the micro psychological perspective and macro sociological perspective, embedding history, economics, politics, and climate science within the frame of a story that loosely follows two main characters. With all of this in mind, it can be argued that *The Ministry for the Future* is an example of an emerging genre of bureaucratic fiction, with a focus on climate change. When beginning each new chapter, it often takes at least a paragraph or two

for the reader to situate themselves in the chosen format, point of view, and subject. Considering that this novel is 563 pages long, this makes the whole more compelling and exciting, as you can never know for sure what will greet you on the next page. There is ample room for each reader to find their own meaning in the story, and most closely follow the storyline or scientific concept that feels most hopeful or important to them.

As Canavan reflects, “The brilliance of *The Ministry for the Future* is that it knows there is no one solution to the fundamental problem of human psychology; some people in the novel need eco-religion, some people need scientific debate, some people need to be convinced there’s more money in a sustainable future than in civilizational collapse, some people only respond to violence, like it or not. There are many roads to enlightenment, the novel seems to be suggesting. Pick whichever road will take you there, and go” (Canavan). Through Mary Murphy and the Ministry’s journey to defend all living creatures and secure a more equitable and sustainable future, the novel seeks to provide every reader with something meaningful. Overall, *The Ministry for the Future* is a scathing critique and exciting reimagination of contemporary capitalism. By emphasizing the role of banks as a central bad actor, and wealthy elites and massive corporations as the major causes of the climate crisis, Robinson takes facts and research and makes them more accessible by weaving them through a narrative. At least for me, this novel is an eye-opening attempt to imagine a world that explicitly recognizes the failures of capitalism and commits to challenging complacent ideology and imagining and implementing more equitable systems of organizing money and power.

The novel opens with a simple statement—“It was getting hotter.” What follows is the chronicling of an imagined massive deadly heat wave in India, which kills 20 million people in one week. Our subject is Frank May, an American aid worker living in Uttar Pradesh, India.

Robinson writes, “6 AM. He looked at his phone: 38 degrees. In Fahrenheit that was—he tapped—103 degrees. Humidity about 35 percent. The combination was the thing. A few years ago it would have been among the hottest wet-bulb temperatures ever recorded. Now just a Wednesday morning” (Robinson 2). From the outset, Robinson ensures that the reality and urgency of climate change is well understood, plunging his reader into the fiery depths of one of the world’s hottest heat waves in history through excruciating detail. We come to understand the increasingly dire scene through Frank’s eyes, as he takes in his surroundings and makes efforts to help some of the people and families around him, by bringing them into the clinic, which had a running A/C unit. The major theme is death and mourning—“Four more people died that night. In the morning the sun again rose like the blazing furnace of heat that it was, blasting the rooftop and its sad cargo of wrapped bodies. Every rooftop...and every sidewalk too was now a morgue. The town was a morgue” (Robinson 8). As people die, violence and tensions rise, as people become willing to do anything to save themselves. There is no time or energy for mourning, only trying to save yourself and the remaining people around you.

After Frank’s A/C unit is stolen from him at gunpoint, his last resort idea is to head to the lake. Here, they find hundreds of heads in the water, including a handful who had died in their attempts to relax their body temperature. As night falls, Frank observes that the water temperature is likely still hotter than their bodies, perhaps nearly boiling. When he awoke, he reflects that “he had been poached, slow-boiled...his limbs were like cooked spaghetti draping his bones, but his bones moved of their own accord. He sat up...Balancing his head carefully on his spine, he surveyed the scene. Everyone was dead” (Robinson 12). From first to final line, this first chapter is painfully enthralling. Though it hurts to read and imagine the grueling details of helpless death and destruction, there is also a drive to know what comes next. Considering that

heat waves are already a fairly normal climatic pattern in summer months, paired with the fact of global temperature rise, there is nothing about this opening that feels hard to believe. It is an imagination built on facts, and full of deep, human emotion and pain. Climate science also shows that India is already an area of the world that is experiencing some of the most significant impacts of climate change, which will only continue to become worse. While beginning this way makes the novel feel like it could be a typical environmental apocalypse or disaster narrative, Robinson quickly shifts toward contemporary realism and introduces the Ministry for the Future, imagining how such an intergovernmental body would respond to this type of crisis.

After Frank watches everyone around him essentially boil to death, he must find the drive to continue living. As the sole survivor of the India heat wave, and one of the core figures in the novel, pieces of Frank's life story are woven throughout the chronological narrative. In the chapters that focus on Frank, we come to understand the psychological impacts of his trauma, as well as his physical and health struggles. Above all else, he is horrified and deeply angered by how few people seem to care about the impacts of the heat wave, and he finds purpose in spreading the word about the urgency of climate change and demanding that people take serious and immediate action. As Robinson explains, "The disaster had happened in India, in a part of India where few foreigners ever went, a place said to be very hot, very crowded, very poor...So this was in some senses a regional problem. And every place had its regional problems. So when the funerals and the gestures of the deep sympathy were done with, many people around the world, and their governments, went back to business as usual. And all around the world, the CO₂ emissions continued" (Robinson 24-25). Even after the emergency meeting of Paris Agreement signatories following the heat wave, while the disaster was given its moment, it looked like the world was going to forget. As is the case with many events, much of the world viewed the heat

wave as a small-scale issue—out of sight, out of mind. For those who did care or report on it, it is just a small blip in the timeline, reported on and publicized for a day or two before being pushed aside for the next news story. One of the dangers of climate change is the fact that the more frequent these disaster events become, the more normalized they will seem. With a news program based on the profit and ratings of immediacy and shock value, heat waves, regardless of how many people they kill, are framed as fairly inconsequential.

As Frank watches the heat wave quickly fall from public interest, without any new discussion of the urgency of global climate action and the responsibility of wealthy, developed nations to fund real change, his drive to take action only increases.

He could feel it burning him up. He wanted to kill. Well, he wanted to punish. People had caused the heat wave, and not all people—the prosperous nations, sure, the old empires, sure; they all deserved to be punished. But then also there were particular people, many still alive, who had worked all their lives to deny climate change, to keep burning carbon, to keep wrecking biomes, to keep driving other species extinct. That evil work had been their lives' project, and while pursuing that project they had prospered and lived in luxury. They wrecked the world happily, thinking they were supermen, laughing at the weak, crushing them underfoot...He wanted to kill all those people. In the absence of that, some of them would do.” (Robinson 65-66).

Robinson begins to suggest that his readers to consider the morality of violence in the pursuit of achieving urgent ecological goals. While Frank is angry in part because of the trauma that he was personally forced to experience, he also cares deeply about the rest of the world and the people who will be impacted by the deadly heat waves and disaster events of the near and distant future. He understands that the history of settler colonialism and imperialism continue to allow the

wealthiest nations to wreak havoc on the natural environment without being held responsible for any of their crimes. In addition, he recognizes that the majority of the world's wealthiest people have accumulated their capital through the evil work of environmental exploitation, as justified by the ideology of human exceptionalism and the belief in the right to dominate.

Global inequalities are what allowed the Indian heat wave to be so devastating in the first place. Robinson quips, "If one percent of the humans alive controlled everyone's work, and took far more than their share of the benefits of that work, while also blocking the project of equality and sustainability however they could, that project would become more difficult. This would go without saying, except that it needs saying" (Robinson 73). Many of the people in Uttar Pradesh did not have the resources to limit their risk or the financial means to travel to somewhere safer, increasing their overall vulnerability. The Paris Agreement states that wealthy and developed nations must provide financial support to less developed nations, but this remains to be seen. If the United States reallocated even a fraction of the money that goes towards Big Oil and other highly emitting industries into assisting nations with weaker economies, the world would become a bit more equitable and sustainable.

Given that this novel's protagonist is arguably the Ministry and its goals to create a more environmentally just future, much of Robinson's focus is on the bureaucratic procedures of this intergovernmental body. Mary Murphy's role as the head of the Ministry is a vitally important part of the text, as Robinson stretches the imagination of what she can help make possible. In one meeting, her chief of staff, Badim Bahudar, insists, "'It isn't enough,' he said. 'What we're doing with this ministry. I'm telling you, it isn't enough'" (Robinson 33). Similarly, in an international meeting, the head of the Indian delegation of the Paris Agreement, Chandra Mukajee, asserts, "'Yes, you know. Everyone knows, but no one acts. So we are taking matters into our own

hands” (Robinson 20). Similar statements are becoming increasingly more common in contemporary society, as climate activists seek to force the world’s rich and powerful to make change, given that our society is hardly even meeting the bare minimum requirements to attain a sustainable future. Even the efforts of individuals in roles that are specifically designed to help mitigate climate change, such as Mary Murphy, almost always fall short of their intentions. One reason for this is the role of bureaucracy, and assuming the need to follow certain rules.

The lives of Robinson’s two central characters collide when Frank tracks Mary down in the streets of Zurich and takes her into custody in her own apartment, catalyzing the novel’s main action. Despite her shock and fear, she retains the wherewithal to observe that “He was young. Late twenties or early thirties...Thin drawn face, dark circles under his eyes. A lean and hungry look, oh yes. Spooked by his own action here, she thought; that would make sense; but that wildness she had seen from the moment he had accosted her was in there too, some kind of carelessness or desperation. To do this thing, whatever it was, he had to be deranged. Something had driven him to this” (Robinson 94). In conjunction with Amitav Ghosh’s work, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, I find this passage particularly noteworthy. While Mary appears to view Frank as a man driven to insanity, Ghosh would argue that his actions are entirely warranted, and even logically sound. He defines our era as “The Great Derangement,” a time that people will look back on in a future entirely altered by the impacts of climate change, and “conclude that ours was a time when most forms of art and literature were drawn into the modes of concealment that prevented people from recognizing the realities of their plight” (Ghosh 11). The *OED* defines “derangement” as a “Disturbance of the functions of the mind; mental disorder; insanity” (*OED*). In the context of both texts, this highlights the argument that failing to assess our reality and take climate action seriously is an act of insanity.

Although Mary does not yet know why Frank has taken her into custody, this information debunks the idea that Frank is any more mentally unstable than Mary, or others around him.

As Frank begins to tell his story as the lone survivor of the India heatwave, and how this experience altered the trajectory and purpose of his life, he demands that Mary listen to him. He begins, “I’m nobody. I’m dead. I’ve been killed...Now I’m supposed to have come back, but I didn’t. Really I’m dead. You’re here, you’re the head of a big UN agency, you have important meetings all over the world, every hour of every day. You don’t have time for a dead man” (Robinson 94). Here, Frank begins to call out the Ministry’s fecklessness, assuming that Mary doesn’t have time for a man like him in her schedule. This is likely another reason why he felt the need to get her attention by force, as he’d never be valued over her meetings with other people in positions of power, despite their failure to make progress. As Mary watches Frank struggle to catch his breath, as he remembers the anxiety and trauma of the heatwave, she asks, “Are you all right now?’ ‘No!’ he cried out angrily. ‘I’m not all right!’ ‘I meant physically.’ ‘No! Not *physically*. Not any way!’” (Robinson 95). Frank explains, the heat was “what made me want to talk to you, maybe, but what I want to say isn’t about that. What I want to tell you is this. It’s going to happen again... ‘Because nothing’s changed!’” (Robinson 95).

In the conversation that follows, Frank pushes Mary to answer the question, “what do you and your ministry know about the future?” (Robinson 95), but he is deeply unsatisfied with her answers, especially her defense of her role and the belief that she was doing all that she could. After some back and forth, Frank takes a deep breath, sinks into the chair, and explains,

“This is why I’m here. You have to stop thinking that you’re doing all you can. Because you’re not. There’s more you could be doing... You have to stop thinking with your old bourgeois values. That time has passed. The stakes are too high for you to hide behind

then anymore. They're killing the world. People, animals, everything. We're in a mass extinction event, and there are people trying to do something about it. You call them terrorists, but it's the people you work for who are the terrorists. How can you not see that?...That's what I mean by not enough. So why don't you do something more?"

(Robinson 97-98).

Mary responds, "I'm trying to avoid violence, that's my job," provoking Frank's response, "I thought you said your job was to avoid a mass extinction event!" (Robinson 97). Through this interaction, Robinson once again invites his readers to think about the morality of engaging in violent action in the pursuit of environmental justice. While already in the midst of a mass extinction event that will only continue to get worse, what kinds of risks are we willing to take to save the planet? Frank suggests that the Ministry engage in "identifying the worst criminals in the extinction event and going after them" because "the violence of carbon burning kills many more people than any punishment for capital crimes ever would. So really your morality is just a kind of surrender" (Robinson 99). Mary defends her "morality" by emphasizing her belief in the rule of law, but Frank asserts that working within the law limits the ability to make progress. He even goes as far as saying that the law is wrong, because it does not protect the wellbeing of the planet and future generations and argues that killing in self-defense is aligned with thinking like the people of the future (Robinson 101). [something else to maybe add in this para is the discussion of what makes a terrorist a terrorist, how do we define an act of terror as a society?]

After Mary's doorbell rings, well after midnight, Frank demands that Mary go tell her visitors that she is okay. She returns to an empty apartment, plunged into silence and forced to sit with her thoughts on Frank's intervention. While Mary is left feeling fearful and angry, we soon learn that Frank's visit does have its desired impact. The following day, in the Ministry office,

Mary briefly mentions her encounter to Badim, who responds and inquires, “So I heard. I’m glad you’re okay. Are you okay?” Mary immediately retorts, “No!” (Robinson 108). This moment parallels Frank’s response to Mary’s inquiry on whether he is okay now, giving Frank an additional level of humanity and dampening Mary’s original assumptions that he was merely a madman. Mary reflects, “I’ve been thinking about our situation. Our dilemma... That we’re charged with representing the people and animals of the future, in effect to save the biosphere on their behalf, and we’re not managing to do it. We’re too weak. You said something like that the time we walked to the lake. The world is careening along toward disaster, and we can’t get it to change course fast enough to avoid a smash” (Robinson 109). As she says this, Robinson explains, “She found she was standing over him. Her paper coffee cup was quivering in her hand, half-squished. He was wincing as he regarded her. He glanced at her coffee as if she might sling it in his face” (109). Throughout this moment, there are many glaring similarities between Frank and Mary’s countenance. There is something completely jarring about repeatedly being told that your life’s work to save the planet is not doing anything. Frank’s persuasion has an instant impact on Mary, leading to an impassioned realization about her job, the Ministry as a whole, and the impact it can have on the future. Badim pushes Mary to think about the efficacy of scaring people through intimidation tactics. While she pushes back at first, she soon remembers the effectiveness of Frank’s attempts to get her attention and scare her enough to ensure that she listened to him very closely and would remember what he had to say. The conversation ends in exasperated realization, as Mary says, “Well, we have to do something. Something more than we’ve been doing” (Robinson 115). Throughout the rest of the novel, Robinson imagines the wide variety of climate action that the Ministry engages in, from

engineering glaciers to prevent sea level rise, to targeting banks to ensure that funds are fundamentally redistributed away from the growth of capital and towards the needs of the future.

One of the most important takeaways from this novel is Robinson's reimagination of the distribution of capital and the role of the economy, debunking the idea that "It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" (Robinson 25). Early on, he defines the issue of global wealth inequality and neoliberalism, highlighting that "The three richest people in the world possess more financial assets than all the people in the forty-eight poorest countries added together [and] the wealthiest one percent of the human population owns more than the bottom seventy percent." As a direct result, "the two billion poorest people on the planet still lack access to basics like toilets, housing, food, health care, education" (Robinson 74). Despite right-wing fearmongering about the dangers of overpopulation and the consequent necessity of poverty, there is

"scientifically supported evidence to show that if the Earth's available resources were divided up equally among all eight billion humans, everyone would be fine... and the scientific evidence very robustly supported the contention that people living at adequacy, and confident they would stay there (a crucial point), were healthier and thus happier than rich people... So there should be no more people living in poverty. And there should be no more billionaires. Enough should be a human right, a floor below which no one can fall; also a ceiling above which no one can rise. Enough is a good feast—or better" (Robinson 57).

This passage raises several important concepts, demystifying capitalism's lies and calling for the end of billionaires, as well as the consequent impoverishment of many of the world's citizens. Robinson advocates for the idea that an equal distribution of resources would allow everyone in

the world to live in a confident state of adequacy, replacing financial anxieties about food and housing with the ability to find peace and happiness in life. This would eliminate the existence of dominant power and exploitation, as well as constant competition, and make room for the growth of community and empathy rather than capital. Given our current state of affairs, this feels like a rather utopian ideal. One question that arises is: how do we actually go about redistributing wealth and moving away for the reigning religion of growth—“a kind of existential assumption, as if civilization were a kind of cancer and them all therefore committed to growth as their particularly deadly form of life” (Robinson 345).

One useful start may be popularizing the concept of the tragedy of the time horizon, which suggests that “we can’t imagine the suffering of the people of the future, so nothing much gets done on their behalf. What we do now creates damage that hits decades later, so we don’t charge ourselves for it, and the standard approach has been that future generations will be richer and stronger than us... But by the time they get here, these problems will have become too big to solve” (Robinson 173). While individuals can make a small impact by consciously choosing where to direct their money, such as funding climate-oriented activist groups and nonprofits, most of the real change must be made in the world’s banks and the governments that no longer regulate them. As Mary realizes during a Ministry meeting, “Because money ruled the world, [bankers] ruled the world... Non-democratic, answerable to no one. The technocratic elite at its most elite... The Paris Agreement’s Ministry for the Future was small and impoverished, these central banks were big and rich. Just because the need was urgent and her case was good, that didn’t mean anything would change. You couldn’t change things with just an idea, no matter how good it was” (Robinson 189). Even though the Ministry for the Future reads as an important and respected intergovernmental body on the surface, they have no real power against the

world's banks and billionaires, who control the movement of capital. This includes funding the things that will be most profitable in the short term, such as the fossil fuel industry. This brings back the relevance of the tragedy of the time horizon, as banks fundamentally fail to consider their impact on the people of the future, only considering the immediate drive for profit and power.

Later in the novel, Mary and the Ministry work to create a plan to introduce legislation to control the world's central banks and limit their power, "giving them mandates and responsibilities to mitigate climate change proactively, as opposed to just responding to the financial risks reactively" (Robinson 292). In this regard, Mary took the initiative to invite the leaders of the world's central banks to meet with her in Zurich, asserting that climate change is so much worse than they seemed to understand. She "was prepared to start a movement worldwide in which governments put their central banks on leashes and directed them to act in ways governments wanted... the specific principal tasks that central banks were charged with could no longer be fulfilled if the climate emergency got out of hand" (Robinson 292-293). While Mary feels as though the case she laid out for the bankers initially left them angry and unenthusiastic, the following several days of deliberation result in a collective proposal. The bankers "would issue together a single new currency, coordinated through the BIS: one coin per ton of carbon-dioxide-equivalent sequestered from the atmosphere, either by not burning what would have been burned in the ordinary course of things, or by pulling it out of the air" (Robinson 294). The introduction of the carbon coin is one of the most promising potential solutions that Robinson imagines for us. While the currency is relatively anti-capitalist in its mission to undo the damage of decades of funding the fossil fuel industry's rampage against the

earth by creating profit by any means necessary, it still upholds a system of exchange that people are familiar with.

In the weeks following the meeting, Mary felt frustrated that little was changing. The world's banks continued to engage with problems retroactively instead of planning ahead in order to mitigate issues before they happen. "Then one month after the carbon coin announcement, a bomb went off in their offices on Hochstrasse. It happened at night, with no one in the building; perhaps that was the bombers' intent, but there was no way to tell" (Robinson 296). This bombing can be read multiple ways—one being that someone was angry about the push for the carbon coin and its aim to diminish the growth of capital and wealth inequality, and two being that climate activists are angry that productive change still isn't being enacted quickly enough to save the earth and its inhabitants. Given the context of this passage, and Mary's preceding frustration that all of her hard work had not yet made a difference, I am tempted to side with the latter. Either way, we are left to consider the meaning of this act of violence as either an attempt to uphold the status quo, or an explosive reminder that existing systems of power still need to be ripped down and built back up if we want to keep living on this planet.

Over the course of the novel, it becomes clear that Robinson chooses to measure time in terms of Conference of the Parties events. After the first few pages, exact years are never mentioned again. Readers do not know how much time has passed, but progress seems to be made fairly quickly. Towards the end, he imagines what might happen at COP 58, which will take place in the year 2053. Thus, the novel's timeline is roughly 2023-2058. The first day of the event is one of celebration for all of the progress and change that had been made, while the second day shone a light on persisting problems. Some of the major improvements include

creating more energy than ever while burning less CO₂, having more wild animals alive than ever, a slow decrease in human population, and successfully placing a cap on individual income and wealth. In regard to CO₂, they explain that the parts per million in the atmosphere dropped by 27 in the last 5 years, to 451. Regaining agency over the situation shifts the discussion from emergency life-saving operations, to how far down the number should be taken. However, despite the importance of some celebration, there is still much room for improvement. The second day of the Conference discussed various problems beyond the question of curbing CO₂ emissions. Some of the main concerns mentioned are pollution, pesticides, plastics, and other wastes, nuclear waste and weapons, the mistreatment of women, and persisting global wealth inequality, with a focus on the United States.

With all of this in mind, Robinson reflects, “Indeed it can never be emphasized how important the Paris Agreement had been; weak though it was at the start, it was perhaps like the moment the tide turns: first barely perceptible, then unstoppable. The greatest turning point in history, what some called the first big spark of the planetary mind. The birth of a good Anthropocene” (Robinson 475). While this sentiment may feel overly positive or utopian, I think it offers an accessible framing of hope, taking the already existing Paris Agreement and placing an image in readers’ minds of what it could make possible for the world if we actually took it seriously. The final line of the novel reads: “We will keep going. There is no such thing as fate” (Robinson 563). Despite the simplicity of this statement, it seeks to foster hope and give power to the importance of persisting through the fight for climate stability and resilience. It will never be easy, but Robinson stretches the limits of the public imagination to offer a potential example of the near future.

Coda: Indigenous Knowledge and Poetic Possibility

In a society built on the values of settler colonial and capitalist exploitation, decolonizing our mindset and actively thinking in ways that subvert violent hegemonic ideology are key to imagining a more equitable and environmentally just future. In traditional Indigenous knowledge, humans and non-human nature are seen as equally important life forms working to sustain each other over time. Before the settler colonization of the Americas, Indigenous people lived in a balanced and reciprocal relationship with the earth. However, with the introduction of ideologies of conquest and “cheap nature,” Native communities lacked the capacity to defend themselves militarily. The research and writing of Indigenous scholars are deeply important resources for the United States in the twenty-first century, yet they are undervalued by the general public. While climate fiction novels such as *On Such a Full Sea* and *The Ministry for the Future* do very important imaginative work on the relationship between hegemonic systems of power and the environmental crisis, they rarely discuss the role of Indigenous knowledge as a vehicle for radical change. The construction of Indigenous knowledge explicitly focuses on the importance of decolonization as a step that must come before imagining a world beyond capitalism.

As Michelle Neely writes in *Against Sustainability*, “there is a vast difference between theorizing and enacting sustainability in relation to a history riddled with settler-colonial, capitalist, white-supremacist, and utilitarian violence and theorizing and enacting sustainability in the context of resistance to these forms of human, nonhuman, and environmental violence. Indigenous sustainabilities (North American and otherwise) frequently draw upon noncapitalist and precolonial lifeways and traditions and have been shaped by centuries of anticapitalist, antiracist, and anticolonial struggle” (Neely 152). While Kim Stanley Robinson explicitly calls

out the capitalist system in *The Ministry for the Future* and imagines what it would look like to begin to break it down and build something better, it is likely not radical enough on its own. We must actively resist and think completely outside of hegemonic systems of power to ensure that we are able to truly push beyond their limits.

In addition, as Kyle Whyte (Citizen Potawatomi) argues, “Thinking about climate injustice against Indigenous peoples is less about envisioning a new future and more like the experience of déjà vu. This is because climate injustice is part of a cyclical history situated within the larger struggle of anthropogenic environmental change catalyzed by colonialism, industrialism, and capitalism” (Whyte qtd. in Davis and Todd). We are aiming to achieve something similar to the life that existed in the Americas prior to settler colonization, although inevitably on a much more complex technological scale. In the process, we must learn to practice relationships of gratitude and reciprocity, both with other people and with the earth, in order to counteract the power of a colonial perspective. What would it mean to take seriously a form of knowing that does not practice colonialism? As Luther Standing Bear writes, “Everything was possessed of personality, only differing with us in form. Knowledge was inherent in all things. The world was a library and its books were the stones, leaves, grass, brooks, and the birds and animals that shared, alike with us, the storms and blessings of the earth” (Standing Bear).

Perhaps this Indigenous form of knowing is best illustrated in *Braiding Sweetgrass*.

Throughout *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, Citizen Potawatomi scholar and botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer, shares and reflects on how traditional Indigenous knowledge has influenced her worldview and deep commitment to focusing on a life that is valued not in monetary terms, but through reciprocal relationships and the deep feelings of love, joy, and gratitude that they can create. She offers us

“a braid of stories meant to heal our relationship with the world...an intertwining of science, spirit, and story—old stories and new ones that can be medicine for our broken relationship with earth, a pharmacopeia of healing stories that allow us to imagine a different relationship, in which people and land are good medicine for each other” (Kimmerer x). Kimmerer explains what it means to live in a way that values relationships of gratitude, reciprocity, love, and care, and the power that these values have to productively unmake the Anthropocene as we know it. When gratitude and reciprocity are actively expressed, relationships become warmer and more fulfilling, and offer a great deal of meaning to our lives.

In the first chapter, Kimmerer offers a personal anecdote from one of her classes, explaining “Nearly every one of the two hundred students said confidently that humans and nature are a bad mix... Later in the survey, they were asked to rate their knowledge of positive interactions between people and land. The median response was “none”” (Kimmerer 6). Most of us have become so well versed in the negative effects of human impact on the earth that our ability to imagine possibilities for good has been significantly hindered. However, by beginning to shift our worldview, we can open ourselves up to the ability to imagine a world that is defined by positive human impact and relation with the world. For instance, as Kimmerer later explains, “Learning the grammar of animacy could well be a restraint on our mindless exploitation of land” (Kimmerer 58). In order to learn this language, we must subvert “the arrogance of English,” which leads us to believe “that the only way to be animate, to be worthy of respect and moral concern, is to be a human” (Kimmerer 57). In learning the grammar of animacy, we come to understand that any and every being should be considered as a person who is worthy of our consideration and gratitude. These instructions tell us that we must very explicitly move away

from viewing the world through an anthropocentric lens, as humans are resolutely not at the peak of the food chain—we just like to flatter ourselves.

On the next page, Kimmerer adds, “I have heard our elders give advice like ‘You should go among the standing people’ or ‘Go spend some time with those Beaver people.’ They remind us of the capacity of others as our teachers, as holders of knowledge, as guides. Imagine walking through a richly inhabited world of Birch people, Bear people, Rock people, beings we think of and therefore speak of as persons worthy of our respect, of inclusion in a peopled world (Kimmerer 58). In viewing the world through the grammar of animacy, we may begin to regain our capacity for imagination that has been lost to the anthropocentric viewpoint and the hard sciences’ devaluation of the legitimacy of knowledge outside of the university system, including Indigenous knowledge. Because the majority of us were taught the importance of being able to recognize the difference between “inanimate” and “animate” objects in our childhood, this shift in perspective alone requires a considerable amount of imagination. But it is very possible, and it may allow us to begin to shift the definition of the Anthropocene. As we start to walk through the world with a consideration of all natural things as our peers and teachers, we will develop a greater deal of respect and understanding for them, fostering relationships of reciprocity and a genuine desire to give back, as a thank you for all that we have taken.

Poet Camille Rankine writes, “If we come to fiction for invention, and we expect fact from nonfiction, what is it that we ask of a poem?... I’m looking for a poetry that sifts through our untruths, unwinding the narratives we’ve come to accept about where we live and who we are... Poetry can fill the gaps in our story. Poetry can tell us what it’s really like, show us what’s really happening, what’s really happened to us” (Rankine). The poetic art form is often used to express powerful and/or revolutionary ideas in a shorter form, allowing feelings about the

environmental crisis, capitalism, etc. to be elucidated through experiments with form, lyricism, syntax, and other literary tools. We'll see shortly an instance of Joy Harjo demonstrating this capacity. Rather than creating a narrative through characters and plot, poetry tends to address its subject(s) more directly and often contains a rhetorical appeal to pathos, making the reader feel certain emotions very deeply. Poetry has also historically been used as an agentic platform by BIPOC artists, sifting through truths and unwinding unconsciously accepted narratives, as Rankine explains.

Pairing Indigenous knowledge with the poetic imaginary offers an additional layer of possibility. Muscogee (Creek) poet Joy Harjo's poetry positions itself both completely outside of and in response/opposition to the logic of settler colonial capitalism, making space for the exploration of what kinds of speculations are possible when the points of origin are decolonial. In fact, Harjo's decolonial perspective impacts things as central as the temporal framework within which she writes and imagines, as Indigenous time begins long before the violent disruption of settler colonialism and the implementation of a profit-based system such as capitalism.

While language can be particularly malignant and exclusive at times, it can also be used to powerfully resist injustice. In the poem "Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings," Harjo represents and gives voice to the Native American perspective of living in respectful harmony with other humans and the natural world, while simultaneously opposing it to the white, capitalist, colonial attitudes of conquest and profit. Harjo effectively formulates a unique six-step poetic instruction manual to conflict resolution, exposing the deep irony of white Americans trying to resolve the violent history of colonization through the imposition of more violence. By

framing her work this way, she also actively mourns and honors the loss of her culture and ancestors. The poem begins,

Recognize whose lands these are on which we stand.

Ask the deer, turtle, and the crane.

Make sure the spirits of these lands are respected and treated with goodwill.

The land is a being who remembers everything (Harjo 77).

By starting this way, Harjo immediately calls attention to the violent history of colonization and stolen Indigenous lands, while also personifying the land as a living being deserving of respect and capable of memory. She forces readers to recognize their positionality and privilege and look beyond the anthropocentric attitude that humanity exists to conquer the non-human world. Harjo also emphasizes the importance of listening, writing “By listening we will understand who we are in this holy realm of words” (Harjo 10). Perhaps the fundamental building block in forming a relationship based on respect, understanding, and trust, the act of listening allows us to recognize and empathize with opinions, cultures, and experiences beyond our own in this “holy realm of words.” Through this line, Harjo subtly calls out white America’s tendency to silence or ignore the voices they don’t care to listen to. This connects directly to Hunter and Ramazani’s understanding of language as both destructive and crucial, as well as to Harjo’s further discussion of language as transnational and boundless. She writes, “We speak together with this trade language of English... [which] enables us to speak across many language boundaries” (Harjo 81). By labeling English as a trade language, Harjo emphasizes that, while it is not necessarily always her language of choice, it allows collective communication the ability to transcend limits. Immediately following these lines, she forms an honorary catalogue of many

of the Indigenous poets who have found their poetic voice in the trade language of English, brightening the precarious world with their art.

In a world so driven by capitalist industrialism, arts such as poetry, music, and dance have the capacity to become revolutionary forces for oppositional justice and political social change. As Harjo asserts, “You cannot legislate music to lockstep nor can you legislate the spirit of the music to stop at political boundaries— / —Or poetry, or art, or anything that is of value or matters in this world, and the next worlds” (Harjo 82). Through this valuation of the arts and matter-of-fact assertion of their power across worlds and prescribed boundaries, Harjo again emphasizes the transnational language of resistance. Her twinned placement of the em dash is particularly noteworthy, as she diverts from the preceding trend of complete sentences. This change in form expresses the diversity and creativity of the arts, and the fact that they are far too powerful to be confined or boxed in. The revolutionary capacity of poetry and the arts extends far beyond the form of Harjo’s poem, visible in movements of social justice and protest, such as at Standing Rock, in opposition of the Dakota Access Pipeline.

Through this poem, Joy Harjo presents the poetic synthesis of Indigenous knowledge, highlighting the limitations of the white male critique and engaging with Kimmerer’s construction of animacy as a way to shift away from the power of hegemonic domination. Ideology leads us down a dead end and blinds us, but Indigenous knowledge producers offer us a way to crack our heads open anew. The people most hurt by the crisis show us a way out intellectually. Will we listen to them?

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