

Agency at/of the waterfront in New York City: *Vision 2020* and *New York 2140*

Lieven Ameel

^a *Turku Institute of Advanced Studies (TIAS), University of Turku, Turku, Finland*

* Lieven Ameel. TIAS / comparative literature, Kaivokatu 12, 20014 University of Turku. Finland
lieven.ameel@utu.fi

Word Count: 7824

Agency at/of the waterfront in New York City: *Vision 2020* and *New York 2140*

[Abstract]

From literary fiction to planning and policy visions, narratives frame, question, and shape the future and our possibilities to act upon it. This paper approaches the question of narrated agency in future narratives through the lens of the New York waterfront, explored here as a site for enacting and critiquing the possibility to act towards the future. Who is described as having the possibility to act at the waterfront, and to what extent is the water seen as a force in its own right? This essay addresses these questions by examining two key texts imagining a future New York City: the New York Comprehensive Waterfront Plan *Vision 2020* (2011) and Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* (2017). It argues that both texts gesture towards an acknowledgement of possible agency of the water, while continuing to reiterate an instrumental relationship with the environment that focuses on processes of appropriation, distribution and production. Ultimately, this essay considers the implications for the implied readers' agency, and for their possibilities to take meaningful action to interact with, and make changes in, their relationship with the water.

Keywords: agency, New York, waterfront, nomos, future narrative

Agency at/of the waterfront in New York City: *Vision 2020* and *New York 2140*

Introduction

The future, in the words of Bertrand de Jouvenel's *The Art of Conjecture* – a founding textbook of futures studies – constitutes a ‘field of uncertainty’ and a ‘field of liberty’ – the domain of the not-yet, onto which everyone is free to project anything one wants. But the future is also a ‘field of power’, and, as de Jouvenel points out, ‘the future is our *only* field of power, for we can act only on the future’ (emphasis added).¹ In a time of global warming and radical climate change, I would add, the future has also become the field of both a shared and individual ethical responsibility.

Examining narratives of the future is one important way to address this interplay between uncertainty, liberty, power, and responsibility. From literary fiction to planning and policy visions, narratives frame, question, and shape the future and our possibilities to act upon it. Crucial for how different forms of storytelling act as storehouses of knowledge with which we approach the future is the question of agency. Who is described as possessing the possibility to act, and how is this ability carried out?

This paper approaches the question of narrated agency in future narratives through the lens of the New York waterfront, explored here as a site for enacting and critiquing the possibility to act towards the future. In the texts examined here, the urban waterfront appears as an arena of transformation, both in material and in allegorical terms, the place where the city’s – and city dwellers’ – coming-of-age rituals are performed time and again. But this is also an area where the water itself appears as a force in its own right, acting upon the environment. The texts examined here are the New York Comprehensive Waterfront Plan *Vision 2020* (2011) and Kim Stanley Robinson’s *New York 2140* (2017). Published in 2011, and commissioned by Mayor Bloomberg’s

administration, *Vision 2020* is the city's second comprehensive waterfront plan, developed in an inter-agency effort with the aim to supplement the earlier 1991 plan. It functions within a 10-year timeframe, but sets out broad policy lines that will most likely reverberate for a much longer period. Completed a year before hurricane Sandy, its vision for a new relationship with the water proved at once acutely relevant and immediately subject to further updating. Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* (2017) has been hailed (somewhat prematurely) as one of the first utopian or optimistic climate fiction novels depicting a future New York City.² It develops themes taken up in various novels in Robinson's earlier work, in particular his *Science in the Capital* trilogy (2004, 2005, 2007). The book endeavours, in an often overtly didactical tone, to address climate change, and to present new kinds of relationships with New York's waterscapes.

A non-fictional policy document such as *Vision 2020*, which lacks a clear authorial or narrative centre, and consists of disparate elements (including lists, maps, regulations), presents a slippery object to examine side by side with narrative fiction such as *New York 2140*, which is why I will start out with an examination in this policy document of the *actors* at sentence level (in the linguistic terminology of thematic relations)³ and *actants* on the level of the story (following the actant model proposed by Vladimir Propp and A.J. Greimas), before moving on to broader questions of narrated agency.⁴ When examining the potential effect of narratives of the future on how we envision our own possibilities to act vis-à-vis climate change, it is agency understood as *human* and *intentional* which tends to take central stage. But examining also how nonhuman entities are imbued with possessing agency in policy documents and literary narratives foregrounds how such human agency takes shape (materially and discursively) within complex networks. The approach to agency in this article, then, has an affinity to Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory (ANT), in which agency is seen as defined by mutually influential roles in complex networks, rather than as one-directional process of an active force acting on a passive recipient (as implied in the

linguistic roles of *actor* and *patient*, and in Greimas's binary relationships between *subject* and *object*).⁵

The recent growth in research on climate fiction has resulted in a number of claims as to the importance of literary narratives for a heightened awareness of agency, suggesting that fictional stories can act as models to empower readers.⁶ Or, conversely, arguing that overtly dystopian narratives describing curtailed agency may lead to feelings of resignation, and thus, to passivity.⁷ More generally, Pieter Vermeulen sees critical responses to agency in the shadow of climate change oscillate between on the one hand a (posthumanist) distrust of human agency and on the other hand (citing Margaret Ronda) a 'humanism, with a vengeance' that retains a keen interest in the possibility of human narrative and agency.⁸ Speaking of the continued concern 'with human agency and responsibility' in Adam Trexler's *Anthropocene fictions*, Vermeulen draws the conclusion that 'literary narrative has a role to play in safeguarding human life and instilling an awareness of a distinctive human agency and responsibility',⁹ a position shared also by this paper. Literary texts do not only offer mediations of agency, they also function as part of a broader network of texts and narrative agents that describe possible courses of actions towards the future.¹⁰ Looking at policy documents and literary fiction side by side, as proposed here, is one way to look at literary fiction not as a separate field disembodied from the material world, but as interacting with other producers of knowledge and shapers of the planet we inhabit.

The belief that the kinds of stories we tell of our own possibilities to act have a crucial importance in the context of climate change is shared also to some extent by literary authors (and Kim Stanley Robinson perhaps in particular) and policy makers.¹¹ Mary Kimball, waterfront planner at the New York City Department of City Planning, and one of the members of the *Vision 2020* Project Team, argued in a personal interview that the 'stories communities tell of themselves dictate how they react and how they see their futures'. She singled out, in particular, stories told by urban communities in the context of rising sea levels.¹² Although wary of drawing direct causal links

between specific narratives and reader empowerment, this paper shares their belief that narratives of agency in the face of radical climate change *do* matter. Examining and critiquing such narratives is also a way to engage with the deficit of the imagination at the root of some of the climate inaction.¹³ And it is a way in which researchers can participate in producing new narrative scripts and frames for climate agency, following Donna Haraway's dictum that '[i]t matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with'.¹⁴

The New York waterfront: conflict and order at the water

In literature and urban planning of the turn of the twenty-first century, the urban waterfront appears as a contested space, an arena where the dialectic between the possible and the realized, between the open and the 'enclosed' (also in relation to the enclosure of the commons) is played out.

Throughout the centuries, tensions at the water have taken on a range of forms: the engagements and conflicts between different European nations, and these and the native inhabitants of the Hudson and Raritan estuary; or the conflicts between common rights to the water and private interests (e.g. in the 'Oyster wars' of the nineteenth century). In the second half of the twentieth century, new tensions arose around the changing nature of the 'working waterfront', the increasingly derelict state of the abandoned industrial waterfront, and new demands for access to the water. The predecessor of *Vision 2020*, the 1992 comprehensive waterfront plan was conceived to present tentative resolutions to tensions caused by the dramatic 'structural changes in the economy, technological advances in maritime activities, [...] and the steady decline of manufacturing in the city'.¹⁵ The events of 9/11 and the spectre of rising sea levels have added new inflections to the dialectic of occupation and retreat of the city's relationship to the water.

Similar to the future, in the definition of de Jouvenel, the waterfront can be described as a domain on which tentative possibility, perceived freedom to act, and tense power relationships are enacted. These dynamics at the border between water and land, city and nature, possibility and realization,

will be approached in this paper by drawing on the work of Carl Schmitt in *The Nomos of the Earth* (1950/2003). *Nomos* has traditionally been translated as ‘law’, but is used by Schmitt in this history of international and public law as the amalgam of processes to order the earth. The normative order of *nomos* belongs to the land, and the process of bringing the whole earth into the sphere of this order is concomitant, in his view, with the gradual adapting of ordering processes to the ‘free’ realm of the sea:

The *sea* knows no [...] apparent unity of space and law, of order and orientation. [...]
 The sea has no *character*, in the original sense of the word, which comes from the Greek *charassein*, meaning to engrave, to scratch, to imprint. The sea is free.¹⁶

Schmitt maps the processes by which, spurred on by the early modern discoveries, the whole world has come under a regime of ‘order and orientation’, a regime that (at the time of writing, in 1950) is moving out into air and space. *Nomos*, according to Schmitt, is ‘the immediate form in which the political and social order of a people becomes spatially visible’, and made possible by three operations: appropriation, distribution, and production.¹⁷

Schmitt’s thinking has affinity with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s conceptualization of ‘smooth’ and ‘striated’ space, in which processes of control, appropriation and production striate a nomadic ‘smooth’ space.¹⁸ But, while Deleuze and Guattari see the sea as the quintessential ‘smooth’ space, ‘striation’ is not associated for them with the land but crucially, with the city as the primordial ‘force of striation’.¹⁹ Deleuze and Guattari add to the thinking on interaction between city and sea at the waterfront a number of crucial inflections. Most importantly, they argue that the forces that aim to dominate space and to fill in ‘smooth’ space with meaning, lines and delineations, *need* and *produce* smooth space to function.²⁰ This is a line of flight that will be further developed in the examination of *New York 2140*, in particular. Schmitt’s thoughts on an emerging ‘*nomos* of the world’ and on the dynamic between a legally ‘open’ and ‘free’ space, and the ‘engraving’

(*charassein*) that aims at distribution and production through a normative order, and Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of *smooth* and *striated* space, will be used here as hermeneutic tools to further unpack and contextualize the way the waterfront and the water is acted upon in *Vision 2020* and *New York 2140*. They will be drawn upon to show how both texts eventually give in to the impulses to privatize and monetize water, despite glimpsing alternative possibilities along the way.

Naming the Water in *Vision 2020*

One way by which a smooth space is transformed into striated space is by naming. *Vision 2020* proposes a variety of names for the New York waterfront and the area of New York City taken up by water. Asserting possession of space and (re-)naming space go here hand in hand, in an operation that is fundamental to urban planning: mapping and naming.²¹ The first and most conspicuous name proposed in *Vision 2020* for the waterfront is that of the 'sixth borough', a naming that also quickly gained coinage in the media coverage of *Vision 2020*.²² The idea of a 'sixth borough' (in addition to the actual five New York boroughs) has a long tradition in the New York imagination. In *Vision 2020*, it is a metaphor that is used figuratively, but the text insists that it can also be taken literally:

Our water is the connective tissue between our boroughs and is, *in effect*, our Sixth Borough. (2; added emphasis)

Water is what connects (drawing in more metaphors, such as that of water as 'connective tissue', and relating thus to the idea of the city as organic body),²³ a view that feeds on the age-old idea of the sea as a bridge.²⁴ But the insistence to see the water as 'in effect' a Sixth Borough, warrants a closer look at the claim being made for the water as an entity with a separate legal status and thus a claim also to specific agency. While such metaphorical language gestures towards new meanings that are given to the waterways, it also points, paradoxically, to their continued lack of political or legal status. Unlike the New York water, actual boroughs have representation, most visible in the

figure of the borough president.²⁵ In *Vision 2020*, the borough presidents appear as actors with real power as defined in the City Charter: ‘Section 197-a of the City Charter authorizes community boards and borough boards, along with the Mayor, the City Planning Commission, the Department of City Planning, and any Borough President to sponsor plans for the development, growth, and improvement of the city’ (17). What *Vision 2020* calls ‘197-a plans’ constitutes one of the few examples of community-initiated waterfront development initiatives. Claiming that the water is ‘in effect’ a sixth borough does not mean it will be invested with actual representation (which actual boroughs have). While positing the possibility of water that possesses representation and legal agency, *Vision 2020* simultaneously dismisses such a possibility in practice.

In legal terms, waterways and water, especially if governed by tidal fluctuation, do have a separate standing (as opposed to land, or water enclosed by land). According to widely established legal practice, land that is situated underneath sea water cannot be privately owned. In the history of New York harbour, questions concerning the legal status of the water came into play with the artificial development of oyster beds in the late nineteenth century. Natural oyster beds remained outside of private ownership, but developers of artificial beds could lease these underwater areas from the state.²⁶ *Vision 2020* refers tangentially to tidal waters’ separate legal status, when noting that, ‘[w]ithin New York State, waterways that are affected by tides are considered to be “navigable by law,” and the public has a right to these waters’ (87).²⁷ The reference underscores the water’s complex and distinctive legal status, especially in terms of public accessibility and common ownership – an area that has the potential of a ‘commons’ in an increasingly privatized and stratified world. Such views of the water as a modern ‘commons’ are further developed, and the consequences of such a view examined, in Robinson’s *New York 2140*. Both Robinson’s novel and *Vision 2020* raise the possibility of the waterfront as commons, but never as a practical viable option.

Actors in Vision 2020

Who are described as actors (on the level of the sentence) and as actants (on the level of the story) in *Vision 2020*? Predominantly the city itself: the Bloomberg administration, speaking through the plan and the planners. Prominent actors are ‘the City’, and ‘the Bloomberg Administration’ (9), and other state organizations such the ‘US Army Corps of Engineers’ and the ‘Port Authority’ (15). Sometimes specific processes and activities are described as actors changing the waterfront (‘zoning’ [14], ‘plans’ [12], ‘housing’ [13]), in which case such activities are typically instruments used by the city. In a close examination of the actors and actants in *Vision 2020*, water, tides, and waterlands are, however, far from absent, especially when compared to the 1992 comprehensive waterfront plan. In the very beginning of the document, water is acknowledged as powerfully transforming the land, and the planners argue that they ‘have recognized that water has always, and will continue to shape our land.’ (3) Water and waterfront areas appear repeatedly as actors on sentence level in *Vision 2020*:

Natural waterfront areas are diverse and valuable assets [...] Wetlands [...] also filter the water and mitigate storm surges [...] Beaches, bluffs, near-shore shallows, and submerged lands perform vital functions, too. (21)

The example above (under Goal 5, ‘Restore the Natural Waterfront’), frames the natural waterfront first and foremost as ‘valuable assets’, areas that ‘perform vital functions’ for the city. Planning is what enables these assets to be active, the functions to be performed better. Water, areas and lands actively ‘do’ things (‘advance’, ‘perform’ [74]; ‘provide’ [75]; ‘enhance’ [86]), but predominantly because the plan makes them do so.

The summaries at the conclusion of each of the eight goals, which consist of enumerations of verbs describing what the plan will do, sum up the prime agent and the main focus of agency: the plan itself. What the plan acts upon – the object and recipient of that agency – is the water and waterfront, presented first and foremost as an object and resource: the New York waterfront and waterways are presented as ‘extraordinary physical assets’ that are ‘possessed’ by the city (6). Such

a description of the water and waterfront in terms of an asset are echoed throughout the text (1, 2).

These descriptions signal the water as a form of ‘smooth space’ that can be subjected to striation, an operation that draws it within the domain of production and control. In *Vision 2020*, the water is fundamentally seen as a resource, something ‘New York can capitalize on’ (86). Adding a new metaphor to that of the ‘Sixth Borough’, the water of the city is described as the ‘Blue Network’, ‘an incredible public resource’ that ‘hasn’t been fully tapped yet’ (86; see also 94). In Goal 6 (‘Enhance the Blue Network), the plan argues that ‘[...] there are many unrealized opportunities to connect people with the waterways – physically, visually, and culturally – and to stitch the Blue Network into the city’s urban fabric’ (86). Here, the metaphorization with which the plan started out (of the water as an active ‘connective tissue’ [3]) is changed subtly to imply it is the plan itself which is doing the connecting, ‘stitching’ the waters into the ‘urban fabric’. The original metaphorization as ‘tissue’ (with undercurrents of organic corporeality) is shifted to one of tissue as clothing, applying a metaphorization from clothes manufacturing (‘stitching’), to a natural environment in a way that also resonates with the labor historically carried out at and near the NYC waterfront.²⁸ Ultimately, as Mayor Bloomberg asserted to the media, ‘the goal of Vision 2020 and our waterfront action agenda is to help New Yorkers maximize these valuable assets’.²⁹ It is an assertion of what Michel Serres has called the ‘Modern Constitution’, the dominant Western metanarrative that determines the relationship between humans and surrounding world in ‘in terms of mastery and possession’.³⁰

At the background of this thinking is not only a particular vision of the water, but also a particular vision of the city: that of an ‘engine of economic growth for America and the world’ (1). It draws on a long-standing imagination of the city as feeding on its natural surroundings to fuel and produce growth. While imagery of the ‘machine in the garden’ tended to be highly critical of the city,³¹ what is new about *Vision 2020* (also compared to the 1991 comprehensive waterfront plan) is that a sustainability thread is woven into the growth narrative. In the plan, sustainability, mitigation of

climate change, and growth go hand in hand. The argument is summed up in the claim that ‘(t)he continued growth of New York City itself is a mitigation strategy for climate change’ (109). Not surprisingly, several critics of the plan have been particularly unsympathetic to this claim.³²

New York 2140

Taking up a range of themes, including those of accessibility to and ownership of the waterfront, the intertidal as commons, the water’s legal status, and the question of who can act *on* and *at* the water, Kim Stanley Robinson’s *New York 2140* (2017) provides a fictional counterpart to the future of *Vision 2020*. Similar to *Vision 2020*, Robinson’s novel can be seen gesturing toward a possible agency *at* and *of* the waterfront, while ultimately yielding to the urge to capitalize on the water as resource. In *New York 2140*, the future city is partly submerged as a result of catastrophic climate change and rising sea water levels. Robinson’s starting point is in part similar to that of *Vision 2020* in that the novel presents a tentative resolution to the social, economic and ecological tensions converging on the New York waterfront in the early twenty-first century. Innovative is how the novel (in addition to drawing extensively on tropes from New York literature, from Whitman and Melville to Lethem and Pynchon) takes the flood – ‘the dominant literary strategy for locating climate change’³³ – as a hyperbolic figure to address these concerns. Most of the action in the novel takes place at the waterfront, in the areas that are drowned or subject to the tides, with a porous differentiation between the zone permanently underwater, ‘the submerged zone’ (108) and ‘the intertidal zone’ – which is also ‘the death zone.’ (113) The zone between high and low tides is the space from which the characters and the plot get their bearings, an area that has characteristics of ‘smooth space’ of the nomadic and as-yet non-descript.

In *Vision 2020*, the plan itself is presented as the key actor and actant, the mover and shifter in the narration. It would be tempting to infer that in *New York 2140*, the eponymous city is the protagonist. But in city literature the city rarely appears as protagonist other than figuratively.³⁴ In

this novel too, it is a fairly conventional array of young and middle-aged men and women who are initiating the action. To rub it in who exactly is presented as actants in the story, each chapter carries the title of that chapter's focalizing protagonist, apart from one which is entitled 'the city'. Each of the chapters typically begins with stating what the character in question (or characters, some of them are paired) do, say, or see.

New York 2140 is an episodic novel in which the voices of the different characters have different status, use different registers, and introduce the reader to different aspects of the intertidal, from (among others) the fast and smooth financial views of Franklin (an I-narrator), to the ponderous thoughts of Charlotte, a lawyer and politician (she-narrator), to various less serious but sometimes not less prophetic voices, such as that of the homeless children Stefan and Roberto; or the tech nerds Jeff and Mutt (who are presented through theatrical dialogue); or the goofy reality TV star Amelia, who lives in a scripted narrative of her own. A narrative connection is created by the voice of 'a citizen', a character with privileged insights into the lives of the others, which suggests he can be equated with the narrator. 'A citizen' provides evaluative as well as contextualizing interludes, backgrounds in terms of the events' history, as well as the financial, ecological and scientific feasibility of various courses of action. What pulls these various characters together spatially is that they are all living in the same building, the Metropolitan Life. But the water takes central stage, and its special status, also in legal terms, is foregrounded, to the extent that it is the intertidal's specific properties that enable (and in part, force) the protagonists to act, livelihoods to be amassed, and the plot to develop.

The 'intertidal zone' is presented as a challenge for the ordering principles – the *nomos* in Schmitt's thinking – that want to control, appropriate, distribute and develop these spatial environments, as well as for the people who are still living there:

... the intertidal zone was turning out to be harder to deal with than the completely submerged zone ... The intertidal ... alternating twice a day from wet to dry, created

health and safety problems that were very often disastrous, even lethal. Worse yet, there were legal issues. (118)

Franklin, the character who is thinking these thoughts, is a trader, and the legal status of the intertidal has direct bearings on his own work and interests. Separate legal status for the intertidal is referred to earlier, with a brief reference to ‘immigration and intertidal [law]’ – the main areas of expertise of another character, Charlotte (11). Franklin provides the reader with a further contextualization of the complex legal status of the intertidal, rooting it in Roman law:

Well-established law, going back to Roman law, to the Justinian Code in fact, turned out to be weirdly clear on the status of the intertidal. It’s crazy to read, like Roman futurology:

The things which are naturally everybody’s are: air, flowing water, the sea, and the sea-shore. So nobody can be stopped from going on to the sea-shore. The sea-shore extends as far as the highest winter tide. The law of all peoples gives the public a right to use the sea-shore, and the sea itself. Anyone is free to put up a hut there to shelter himself. The right view is that ownership of these shores is vested in no one at all. Their legal position is the same as that of the sea and the land or sand under the sea.

(118-119)

The quotation in italics, which is indeed an actual quotation from the Justinian code, presents the intertidal as a *de jure* commons. It cannot be owned or taken into possession, and everyone has access to its use. Although the ‘legal issues’ pertaining to the water are presented first as ‘worse yet’ for Franklin and others, they also present clear opportunities. Franklin moves on from the legal background to explain how the complex legal status of the waterfront enables him to make profit. In the intertidal, value is being generated, but ownership, use, and risks are uncertain. It is Franklin’s special ability to draw an index, a graph representing the financial value of the intertidal –

producing characterizations onto a space of uncertainty, in the way of *charassein* or engraving as proposed by Carl Schmitt. For Franklin, the intertidal is thus simultaneously the ‘zone of uncertainty and doubt’ and a ‘space of risk and reward’ (126).

The novel posits the uncertain status of the intertidal as going back to long-standing legal practices and understandings of the sea and the water. It glosses over the long historical process of ‘striating’ this space, from the early modern period onwards, a process at the background of Deleuze & Guattari’s ‘striated space’, and described in detail by Carl Schmitt in *The Nomos of the Earth*.³⁵ *New York 2140* suggests that the power of economic and state logic over the waters has been interrupted and overturned by the catastrophic sea level rise and flood ‘pulses’ of the twenty-first century, to make way for a renewed sense of the commons. The flood pulses have overthrown the existing *nomos*, creating a new field of instability within which a new regime of order can take shape. It has become ‘the seashore that belonged to the unorganized public’ (126). In the historical contextualization of the ‘citizen’, it is noted how ‘[h]egemony had drowned, so in the years after the flooding there was a proliferation of cooperatives, neighbourhood associations, communes [...]’ (209). As Schmitt points out, ‘every new age and every new epoch [...] is founded on new spatial divisions, new enclosures, and new spatial orders of the earth.’ (78) In *New York 2140*, the ‘citizen’s’ authoritative voice, preparing the reader for such new ‘spatial orders’ to arrive, warns that, ‘wherever there is a commons, there is enclosure’ (210) – and argues that the intertidal is also, ‘taken all in all, a place that might make for a very high rate of return on investment!’ (210)

Agency is throughout most of the novel the prerogative of humans, but there are a few specific passages in which the possibility of the intertidal as an area with special agency is taken into a radical new direction. At one point Jeff and Mutt, incarcerated by arcane forces in a container at the bottom of the East River, begin telling each other stories of hope. Mutt imagines a possible New York in which ‘(e)very single element of this land, right down to the bedrock, was a citizen of the community they all made together, and they all had legal standing, and they all made a good living’

(297). But – similar to the powerless metaphor of the Sixth Borough in *Vision 2020* – this view of natural elements as possessing legal status has no real traction. I puts Jeff to sleep: ‘The story has put him to sleep. A kind of lullaby, it has turned out to be. A tale for children.’ (*ibid.*) It should be added that the voices of Jeff and Mutt are the least rational or coherent in the novel, presented as an idiosyncratic, child-like chorus to the events, which presents truths and insights to the broader storylines more by accident than on purpose.

Liquidity: Capitalizing on the intertidal

Just as, in *Vision 2020*, the talk of a ‘sixth borough’ is part a metaphorical façade for more poignant storylines of exploitation of a spatial, natural, and symbolic resource, the gestures towards water agency in *New York 2140* hide in plain sight more pressing liquid metaphors that point towards an instrumental relationship to the city’s water. The book drowns in metaphors of liquidity, most of them with a strong financial undercurrent, which has led one critic to argue that ‘the drowned city of New York seems only a stage set [...] to provide an analysis of late capitalism and explore alternative financial ideas’.³⁶ The most obvious meltdown in the novel is that of the glacial ice, responsible for the rising waters (34). But at the background is another meltdown of another liquidity: the big crash of 2008 and the responses to it, events to which the characters in 2140 return to time and again in surprising detail. Rather than presenting water as possessing a measure of agency, *New York 2140* describes liquidity as a metaphorization for capitalism’s power to restrict and direct human agency within monetized relationships. One of the key scenes to understand liquidity in the novel is the proposed interaction between liquid and illiquid set forth by Frank halfway the novel:

[...] think about ordinary people [...] they need stability. They want what you could call illiquid assets, meaning home, job, health. Those aren’t liquid, and you don’t want them liquid. So you pay a steady stream of payments for those things to stay illiquid

[...] people have illiquidity, and finance has liquidity, and finance profits from the spread between those states. (347)

Agency in the novel is posited as bound up with the wave-like movement between capitalist finance and the public ('ordinary people'), and the processes by which 'illiquid' assets can be capitalized upon, and back, recalling Deleuze and Guattari's observation about the continuous oscillation (rather than opposition) between 'striated capital and smooth capital, and the way in which the former gives rise to the latter'.³⁷ The waterfront is the place for the 'spread between those states', but it also functions as a powerful metaphorization for the tides moving back and forth between states of matter.

Émile Zola (again with a watery metaphor) notes that money 'is very difficult to write a novel about. It's cold, glacial, devoid of interest'.³⁸ Robinson's book proves the point. But the way in which it envisions the water in this back-and-forth between liquid and illiquid is fascinating exactly because of its contradictory complexity. On the one hand, rising waters have pushed back late capitalist 'hegemony', creating the possibility for a new commons; on the other hand, the 'liquidity' of the rising waters and melting caps is aligned with that of financial forces. This double liquidity comes close here to the 'two types of liquidity' explored by Anna Hartnell in her examination of cultural responses to Hurricane Katrina, which pit Zygmunt Bauman's 'liquid capital' against the liquidity of the 'floodwaters that threaten New Orleans'.³⁹ But the crucial difference with Hartnell's corpus is that in *New York 2140*, the different forms of liquidity are working in tandem, illustrating the observation by Deleuze and Guattari that 'striation' produces in turn new 'smooth' spaces, which it 'disgorges' ('dégorger') in order to draw on new resources; striation needs a commons in order to enclose it and capitalize upon it.⁴⁰

The final part of the novel is entitled 'the comedy of the commons' (535 ff.) and envisions some kind of happy ending for all the protagonists and their various endeavours. The title refers, of course, to the 'tragedy of the commons', a term coined by Garrett Hardin in a 1968 article in

Science to denote the threat of overuse of resources with communal access rather than private ownership. Hardin referred in his article also to how ‘the oceans of the world continue to suffer from the survival of the philosophy of the commons’.⁴¹ The novel suggest that it is in part a relentless growth ideology, which held the finite nature of resources in contempt, that had led to the catastrophic climate change leading up to 2140 – the tragedy of the commons is thus a real event in the *New York 2140* storyworld. But the truly tragicomic aspect of the section ‘the comedy of the commons’ is that the protagonists, so long bound up in a didactic tale of revolution to overturn capitalist structures, turn out to be the happy few who make a profit from the water and who cash in on it by reading and engraving their own marks into the waves. The denouement of the plot sees the protagonist engage hands-on with a reclaiming, appropriation, distribution and development of the spoils of the waterfront – a gradual ‘striation’ of what was ‘smooth’ in the beginning of the novel, and, in the terms of Schmitt, the establishment of a new *nomos*. The protagonists confirm their ownership of the Metropolitan Life building and literally harvest the intertidal in the form of the mythical treasure of the sunken British ship *The Hussar*. The treasure hunters find the ship by their ability to read maps, by superimposing lines and ‘characters’ on the water, using a giant dredging craft in the enterprise. They melt the gold – literally transferring this resource through a series of states of liquidity – to have it put in a financial trust, and they use their inside knowledge of a coming credit crunch to hedge against coming market disruptions. And they invest this illiquid-turned-liquid back into the intertidal through the development of floating real estate. The final stages of the novel see Charlotte and Frank teaming together to develop and fund new urban structures – drifting mini-cities that can ride with the current – and bring in public funds to develop the ‘commons’ of the intertidal, while simultaneously aiming to take this space into private possession for better future management (286-287, 555-556).

Franklin’s investment groups (which included the Met gold gang) had secured provisional property rights [...] plus demolition permits, building permits, and the

funding to build. The funding was a combination of their monetized gold, federal and nonprofit grants, angel investors, venture capital, and ordinary loans, achieved before the paralysis of the liquidity crisis and credit crunch [...] (556)

Profit maximization and the promise of ecological living, in balance with the environment, are presented as going hand in hand, in a way not dissimilar to that set out in *Vision 2020*. Despite the protagonists' defiant embrace of revolutionary phrases (using the 'guillotine' [151]; 'liquidation of the rentier' [398]; a misquotation from Keynes, as Charlotte points out), they solve their problems by becoming rentiers – and not by the fruit of long or hard work, but by a stroke of good luck, an unlikely inheritance wrested from the intertidal commons. *New York 2140*, then, tells how a group of disaffected individuals rise from the submerged city, become tied together by revolutionary zeal and the urge to change the world, and are eventually transform into the 'Met gold gang' (556) and 'a holding company' (595), a group going into urban redevelopment and real estate investment without the blink of an eye.

What agency *of* and *at* the waterfront?

In the last pages of the novel, agency is again given, for a moment, to the water itself, as the narrative voice of 'the citizen', gestures towards turn-of-the-twenty-first century philosophy on material agency:

Remember not to forget, if your head has not already exploded, the nonhuman actors in these actor networks. Possibly the New York estuary was the prime actor in all that has been told here [...] But again, enough with the philosophy! (601)

Like the earlier reference to the intertidal as a citizen amongst others, this view of 'the New York estuary' as the 'prime actor' is not more than an empty gesture. The idea of water as 'actor' appears as an afterthought, only to be dismissed – 'enough with the philosophy'!

For the protagonists, a growing sense of agency comes from their ability to capitalize on the waterfront and to extract liquid value from the flux of the intertidal, to become able to gain ownership and to hold on to it, and to turn ‘illiquid’ assets (such as the treasure of the *Hussar* wreck) into ‘liquid’ value, even if this means turning communal property into private property.

And what agency does the text envision for the reader? The reader is explicitly addressed in the text, with the ‘citizen’, in particular, talking to the reader from the pages of the text in a direct ‘you’ (263). There are a variety of ways in which the sections presented by the ‘citizen’ explicitly and implicitly frame the possibility of the reader to act in the face of climate change. But perhaps the most crucial aspect is that in *New York 2140*, the window for meaningful climate action has already (almost) closed by the time of publication, in 2017 – a surprising temporal structure that the novel shares with other contemporary climate fiction novels.⁴²

So despite ‘changing everything’ and decarbonizing as fast as they should have fifty years earlier, they were still cooked like bugs on a griddle. Even tossing a few billion tons of sulfur dioxide in the atmosphere [...] which they did in the 2060s was not enough to halt the warming, because the relevant heat was already deep in the oceans [...] (139-140)

Real change should have been initiated ‘fifty years’ earlier than the 2060s – in the 2010s – which means readers find themselves within the window of possible action, but only just, and increasingly less so.

Rather than an optimistic and ‘surprisingly utopian’ view of human defiance, as some critics have it,⁴³ I would argue that *New York 2140* offers a bleak examination of the limits set to action by monetary structure, and the power of financial liquidity to embrace even the noblest of causes and have them enmeshed in the ebb and flow of global finance. Such a view is in part compatible with a range of recent research, critical of the prose novel’s affordances to describe meaningful

possibilities for action beyond the immediate personal circle.⁴⁴ Similarly, *Vision 2020* can hardly be blamed for doing what a planning document is supposed to do: setting out how it will order, arrange, and develop the planning area for the overt benefit of its citizens (and that of the less explicated vested interests jostling for predominance). If neither of these two texts give exactly cause to celebrate the possibilities to act towards a better future of and at the waterfront, *Vision 2020* and *New York 2140* do provide a number of insights. Citizens *can* act, in *Vision 2020*, to propose change, protected as they are by the New York charter and in the form of ‘197-a plans’ that enable communities to initiate development initiatives. In both texts, the water *can* be thought of as possessing legal status and independent agency, even if only as a thought experiment. The waterfront, even if relentlessly reclaimed, appropriated, redistributed, capitalized upon, does retain a measure of its transformative power regardless; a sense of openness from which a new order can arise, only partially shaped by conscious and intentional efforts – and so does the future.

¹ Bertrand de Jouvenel, *L'Art de la Conjecture* (Monaco: Éditions du Rocher, 1964), p. 15.

² Daniel Aldana Cohen, ‘It Gets Wetter’, *Dissent*, 64, no. 3 (2017), pp. 7-11. See also Carl Abbott, ‘The next New York’, *Science* 355, no. 6330 (2017), p. 1135.

³ See Robert D. Jr. Van Valin, ‘Semantic macroroles in Role and Reference Grammar’, in Rolf Kailuweit and Martin Hummel (eds.), *Semantische rollen* (Tübingen: Narr, 2004), pp. 62-82.

⁴ Algirdas Julius Greimas, *Sémantique structrale: recherché de méthode* (Paris: Larousse, 1966).

⁵ Bruno Latour argues that ‘*any thing* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor – or if it has no figuration yet, an actant.’ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An introduction to Actor-Network theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 71.

⁶ See e.g. Janice M. Bogstad, ‘Global Warming Literature’, in Brian C. Black et al. (eds.), *Climate Change: An Encyclopedia of Science and History 1* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio, 2013), p. 780.

⁷ See Manjana Milkoreit, ‘The promise of climate fiction: imagination, storytelling, and the politics of the future’, in Paul Wapner and Elver Hilal (eds.), *Reimagining Climate Change* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 187-188.

⁸ Margaret Ronda as quoted in Pieter Vermeulen, ‘Future Readers: Narrating the human in the Anthropocene’, *Textual Practice*, 31, no. 5 (2017), p. 868.

⁹ Vermeulen, ‘Future Readers’, p. 869.

¹⁰ Ibid, ‘Future Readers’, p. 870.

¹¹ Robinson has repeatedly spoken out for the importance of fictional responses to climate change, arguing that we ‘decide what to do based on the stories we tell ourselves, so we very much need to be telling stories about our responses to climate change and the associated massive problems bearing down on us and our descendants.’ Kim Stanley Robinson, ‘Foreword’, in Manjana Milkoreit et al. (eds.), *Everything Change. An Anthology of Climate Fiction* (Arizona State University, 2016), pp. ix-xii.

¹² Mary Kimball, personal interview with the author, 8 September 2016.

¹³ See Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: The Crisis of Imagination in the Era of Climate Change* (Chicago: Chicago University Press: 2016).

¹⁴ Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 12.

¹⁵ *New York City Comprehensive Waterfront Plan. Reclaiming the City's Edge* (New York: Department of City Planning, 1992) p. 83.

¹⁶ Carl Schmitt, *The nomos of the earth in the international law of the Jus publicum Europaeum* (New York: Telos Press, 2003), pp. 42-43. See also Claudio Minca and Rory Rowan, ‘The question of space in Carl Schmitt’, *Progress in Human Geography* 3, no. 39 (2015), pp. 268-289; also René ten Bos, *Water. Een geofilosofische geschiedenis* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2014), pp. 177-178.

¹⁷ Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, p. 70.

¹⁸ I am indebted to René ten Bos’s insightful book *Water* for drawing attention to the similarities between Schmitt’s thinking and that of Deleuze and Guattari.

¹⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Milles Plateaux* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1980), pp. 481, 598, 601. A complication concerning the term *nomos* is added by Deleuze and Guattari in that they consider *nomos* (starting out from the same etymological root of *nomos* as ‘distribution’ and ‘pasturing’ used by Schmitt) as akin to the free and unforced distribution practiced in *smooth* space, and opposed to *striated* space. Deleuze and Guattari, *Milles Plateaux*, pp. 600-601.

²⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *Milles Plateaux*, p. 479.

²¹ See e.g. for naming (in the context of Paris) Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, *Paris as Revolution: Writing the Nineteenth-century City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 13-31. Carl Schmitt tentatively establishes a possible link between *nomos* and the Indo-European root for *name*, connecting the concept of appropriation inherent in *nomos* with name-giving – Schmitt, *Nomos of the Earth*, pp. 336 ff.

-
- ²² See e.g. Richard Yeh, ‘City Reclaims Waterfront as “Sixth Borough”’, *WNYC News*, 14 March 2011. <https://www.wnyc.org/story/118192-blog-city-reclaim-its-waterfront-assets-sixth-borough/> [Date accessed: 5 March 2018].
- ²³ See Lieven Ameel, ‘A *bildungsroman* for a waterfront development. Literary genre and the planning narratives of Jätkäsaari, Helsinki’, *Journal of Urban Cultural Studies* 3, no. 2 (2016), pp. 167-187.
- ²⁴ ‘Pontos’ or bridge as one of three conceptualizations for the Greeks, the others being ‘thalassa’ (mother) and ‘pelagos’ (far reaches); see ten Bos, *Water*, p. 159.
- ²⁵ See New York, ‘New York City Charter: Borough Presidents’, *New York City Charter*. [http://library.amlegal.com/nxt/gateway.dll/New%20York/charter/newyorkcitycharter/chapter4boroughpresidents?fn=default.htm\\$3.0\\$vid=amlegal:newyork_ny\\$anc=JD_81](http://library.amlegal.com/nxt/gateway.dll/New%20York/charter/newyorkcitycharter/chapter4boroughpresidents?fn=default.htm3.0vid=amlegal:newyork_ny$anc=JD_81) [Date accessed: 15 March 2018].
- ²⁶ Mark Kurlansky, *The Big Oyster. New York on the Half Shell* (New York: Ballantine, 2006), p. 123.
- ²⁷ A term originally from common law, ‘navigable by law’ denotes that a waterway can be used freely by the public, even when it abuts private land.
- ²⁸ Incidentally, Deleuze and Guattari discuss at some length questions of texture or tissue (‘tissu’) in their examination of smooth and striated space; see Deleuze and Guattari, *Milles Plateaux*, p. 594 ff.
- ²⁹ Yeh, ‘City Reclaims Waterfront’.
- ³⁰ Kate Rigby, ‘Confronting Catastrophe: Ecocriticism in a Warming World’, in Louise Westling (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014), p. 212.
- ³¹ See Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).
- ³² See Steven T. Moga. ‘The Territory of the Edge. History, Planning, and New York City’s “Sixth Borough”.’ *Journal of Planning History*, 12, no. 1 (2013), pp. 86-91. See also Ted Steinberg, *Gotham Unbound. The Ecological History of Greater New York* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014).
- ³³ Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2015), p. 82. See for more recent discussions of the flood in contemporary literature also: Christopher Lloyd and Jessica Rapson, ‘Family territory to the “circumference of the earth”: local and planetary memories of climate change in Barbara Kingsolver’s Flight Behaviour’, *Textual Practice*, 31, no. 5 (2017), pp. 911-931; and Paul Dobraszczyk, ‘Sunken Cities: Climate Change, Urban Futures and the Imagination of Submergence’, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 41, no. 6 (2017), pp. 868-887.
- ³⁴ Lieven Ameel, ‘The city novel: measuring referential, spatial, linguistic, and temporal distances’, in Robert T. Tally (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Literature and Space* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 233-241.
- ³⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *Milles Plateaux*; Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*.
- ³⁶ Christian De Cock, ‘We are going to have to imagine our way out of this one.....: Climate change, fiction and Organization’, *Organization* 25, no. 1 (2018), pp. 150-153.
- ³⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *Milles Plateaux*, p. 614.
- ³⁸ As quoted in David Harvey, *The Urban Experience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 166.
- ³⁹ Anna Hartnell, ‘Writing the liquid city: excavating urban ecologies after Katrina’, *Textual Practice* 31, no. 5 (2017), p. 936.
- ⁴⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *Milles Plateaux*, p. 624-625.
- ⁴¹ Garrett Hardin, ‘The Tragedy of the Commons’, *Science* 162, no. 3859 (1968), p. 1245.
- ⁴² See Lieven Ameel (forthcoming), ‘Antti Tuomainen: *The Healer*’, in Adeline Johns-Putra and Axel Goodbody (eds.), *Reader in Climate Fiction* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2018).
- ⁴³ See Joshua Rothman, ‘Kim Stanley Robinson’s Latest Novel Imagines Life in an Underwater New York’, *The New Yorker*, 27 April 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/kim-stanley-robinsons-latest-novel-imagines-life-in-an-underwater-new-york> [Date accessed 15 March 2018].
- ⁴⁴ See Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions*, p. 35; Antonia Mehnert, *Climate Change Fictions: Representations of Global Warming in American Literature* (London: Palgrave, 2016), pp. 227-228.