Narratives of Resilience in Times of Climate Crisis: Angry Optimism and Utopian Minimalism in Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* and Jenny Offill's *Weather*

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ABSTRACT

The essay discusses two climate change novels, Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* and Jenny Offill's *Weather*, as resilience narratives. It argues that these novels – *New York 2140* speculating about a possible future, set more than 100 years in the future, *Weather* engaging our present cultural moment, the early 21st century – explore diverse experiences of, and responses to, human-made climate crisis, directly engaging with the interconnected ecological, political, economic, social, and cultural effects of global warming, but also with responses such as climate skepticism and denial as well as cognitive dissonance, climate anxiety, and grief related to climate change. Applying the concept of resilience in its diverse meanings as an analytical framework emphasizes that fictional climate narratives often go beyond merely "sounding the alarm" about climate risks or concentrating exclusively on catastrophe. Rather, they also shed light on strategies of adaptation, flexibility and endurance and on the potential for transformation to allow for a more hopeful and even utopian reading. For this purpose, the concepts of "angry optimism" and "utopian minimalism" are introduced, the former articulated by Robinson, the latter introduced by critic Anahid Nersessian, who have both participated in the debate on the relevance and timeliness of utopianism in times of climate crisis.

Writing about global warming and climate change in the United States has often meant "sounding the alarm." Since at least the 1980s, perhaps most notably when NASA climate scientist James Hansen alerted the world to the greenhouse effect, scientists and environmental activists have warned that inaction on reducing greenhouse gas emissions would lead to profound changes everywhere on the planet, with disastrous consequences for both humans and the more-than-human world. Since the 1990s, scientific warnings, expressed in factual texts such as the IPCC (the United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) report, have been increasingly complemented by fictional texts. Most significantly, perhaps, climate change novels and movies have begun to explore the current moment of increased uncertainty or envision possible planetary futures, the latter more often than not dystopian scenarios that depict a world after climate collapse (Johns-Putra; Mehnert; Andersen). The climate knowledge offered by these fictional narratives of socio-ecological catastrophe, but also the knowledge provided especially by novels that focus on the risks of global warming, i.e. on the mere anticipation of possible disasters, have contributed significantly to raising awareness and warning against a wide array of possible threats (Mayer).

For a long time, such alarm-sounding has been met with strong skepticism or outright denial on the part of a majority of the US population, explaining the country's often obstructionist stance in international climate change policy (Falke). In recent years, however, the range of responses to factual and fictional climate alarm-sounding has further expanded not only in the United States but in large parts of the affluent West. The increasingly undeniable impacts of a changing climate have drawn heightened attention to psychological and emotional challenges, such as climate anxiety or climate-related grief and cognitive dissonance. In the case of climate change, the latter describes the discomfort that arises when personal lifestyle choices conflict with climate change awareness. Reflecting on the experience of her students, the "climate generation" contending with feelings of powerlessness and despair over the ineffectiveness of national and international climate policies, Sarah Jacquette Ray notes that "[f]eelings of grief, mourning, fear, and overwhelm are giving rise to a new vocabulary, including such terms as *climate anxiety*, *vicarious trauma*, *solastalgia*, *pre-traumatic stress disorder*, and *secondary grief*" (5–6; original emphasis). Clinical psychologist Sarah Lowe defines climate anxiety as "distress about climate change and its impacts on the landscape and human existence," as "intrusive thoughts or feelings of distress about future disasters or the long-term future of human existence and the world, including one's own descendants" (qtd. in "Yale Experts"). Her colleague, geographer and climate communication specialist Anthony Leiserowitz in this

context distinguishes between "worry" and "distress." He explains that distress involves more intense physiological and behavioral effects that have a stronger negative effect on health and social relationships. Worry, on the other hand, can be beneficial. As he notes, "if you worry about something, you are motivated to figure out what you can do about it . . . We actually need more people to be worried about climate change" (qtd. in "Yale Experts"). Finally, climate change-related grief, Lesley Head claims, means "the converging, congealing grief at the loss of the conditions that underpin contemporary Western prosperity . . . for the approaching demise of the conditions sustaining life as we know it . . . for the loss of a future characterised by hope" (2).

The response of politics to a steadily increasing number of climate-induced, large-scale disasters across the United States, caused, for instance, by record-breaking wildfires, rainfall, flooding, and heat waves, has been a focus on building resilience. To help US-American communities better withstand and recover from such disasters, US federal governments have, since Hurricane Sandy in 2012, progressively invested in "sea walls, storm drains, building science, forest management and other strategies," such as "disaster resilience zones." In 2023 alone, as Christopher Flavelle points out, FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) designated almost 500 communities as disaster resilience zones, which are eligible for increased federal funding.

Building resilience has become a central concern in climate change policies, not least as a response to increasing climate anxiety, both in the United States and internationally. "Resilience," however, has by now also become a concept with many meanings that signal its relevance for a variety of fields. Since the 1970s and 1980s, it has become what Sarah Bracke calls a "traveling concept" (55), a concept that originated in the natural and social sciences but then expanded into the realms of politics and culture. More recently, it has entered the fields of literary and cultural studies. In this essay, I will draw on several meanings of resilience and discuss two contemporary climate change novels as "resilience narratives": Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* (2017), which speculates about a possible future more than a century from now, and Jenny Offill's *Weather* (2020), set in our present cultural moment, the early 21st century. I will show how these novels explore diverse experiences of and responses to the climate crisis by directly engaging with the interconnected ecological, political, economic, social, and cultural effects of ongoing global warming, but also, especially in the case of *Weather*, with climate skepticism and denial as well as cognitive dissonance, climate anxiety, and grief related to climate change. Applying resilience as an analytical framework emphasizes that fictional climate narratives go beyond merely "sounding the alarm" about climate risks or concentrating exclusively on catastrophe. Rather, they also shed light on experiences and strategies of adaptation, flexibility,

and endurance, allowing for a more hopeful, even utopian, reading. Before engaging the two novels, however, I will introduce the three concepts that are central to my readings of the texts as resilience narratives: the concepts of "angry optimism" and "utopian minimalism," articulated by writer Kim Stanley Robinson and critic Anahid Nersessian respectively, and the concept of resilience, which has developed a broad range of meanings over time. I will conclude with a few remarks on the potential contribution fictional resilience narratives like *New York 2140* and *Weather* make to overcome a narrow focus on dystopian scenarios and instead draw on the tradition of utopian writing to develop a more complex perspective, including a sense of hope.

Angry Optimism, Utopian Minimalism, and Resilience: Conceptual Issues

Kim Stanley Robinson has for a long time explored the risks of climate change in his work, primarily through science fiction and speculative fiction novels. However, beyond his fiction, in interviews and essays, he has joined literary scholars such as Ursula K. Heise and Gerry Canavan in challenging the common notion that climate fiction is dominated by dystopian or disaster narratives. Like them, he has put emphasis on the unique role of science fiction in offering alternative narratives that engage much more complexly in the topic. Reflecting on his own body of work, Robinson expresses surprise when realizing that over the past three decades many of his novels reveal a persistent utopian dimension – despite worsening environmental risk scenarios and inadequate political, economic, and cultural action on climate change. This drive toward utopianism he calls "angry optimism."

In his 2016 essay "Remarks on Utopia in the Age of Climate Change," Robinson explains his holding on to utopianism by stating his conviction that a speedy, global de-carbonization will still give humanity the time to prevent the worst consequences of climate change. Emphasizing the urgency of the situation and the need to become active and implement de-carbonization measures, he even argues that today "utopia is no longer a nice idea but, rather, a survival necessity" (10). A year later, in 2017, he uses the phrase angry optimism in an interview to describe the driving force behind his writing. Robinson refers to a well-known statement from Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, where Gramsci, while critically analyzing the rise of authoritarianism in the 1930s, maintains an optimistic belief in the potential for socialist change. Gramsci describes this stance as "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will" (qtd. in de Vicente). When interviewer José Luis de Vicente asks Robinson: "Why do you think we need to defend optimism, in the face of this massive problem that is so scary?", he responds:

> I do think [optimism is] important, but you do have to begin and hold on to the idea that this is a massive problem, that there is going to be suffering and disaster. Then,

the optimism involved in there is just a very angry optimism . . . the optimism that I'm trying to express is that there won't be an apocalypse, there will be a disaster. But after the disaster comes the next world on. (qtd. in de Vicente)

Robinson writes not only for present-day audiences but also for "the next world on" – for future generations. His anger is directed primarily at the privileged parts of the world, against affluent elites that bear significant historical responsibility for global warming yet fail to take sufficient action to address it. His critique targets in particular the unwillingness to recognize, respect and put to use the many insights that the sciences have produced, insights that disprove the claims of climate skeptics and deniers.

Robinson expresses his stance again in a 2023 interview, entitled "How to Create an Optopia?". "Given our situation," he argues, "I would recommend being fueled by dread, but also buoyed, and kept focused on the necessary work, by willed hope, as a political position." He picks up the term "optopia," which he attributes to feminist science fiction writer Joanna Russ, to explain that his goal in writing climate fiction is to envision "the optimum society, the best one possible given where we are now . . . We have a moral obligation to find that optopia" (qtd. in Mikes and New 231). My argument is that such "optopias," expressions of Robinson's angry optimism, may come in the form of resilience narratives.

In her article "Utopia's Afterlife in the Anthropocene," published in 2017, Anahid Nersessian also contributes to the debate on whether utopianism is viable or even justified in times of environmental crisis. She argues that "the crisis itself would seem to remain incommodious to anything that smacks of utopianism, if by utopian we mean *optimistic*" (91). However, like Robinson, Nersessian comes to the defense of utopianism by proposing "utopian minimalism," a concept that moves away from visions of utopia as "perfection" in the sense of "plenitude." Instead, it asks how "both the idea and the value of 'perfection' might be calibrated to a planetary situation of amplified instability and attenuated possibilities" (92). By tracing a tradition of utopian thought and writing that does not center on ideas of "plenitude" – a tradition exemplified, for example, by Ursula K. Le Guin's science fiction novel *The Dispossessed* (1974) – Nersessian suggests embracing "the radicalism of being minimal" (92).

For Nersessian, philosopher Kate Soper's idea of "alternative hedonism" best describes what she has in mind. Alternative hedonism advocates for the pursuit of pleasure that encompasses both intellectual and sensory experiences, embracing "lively, even joyous practices of moderation and restraint" (93). Drawing on Le Guin's novel as an example, Nersessian shows that utopianism may refer to "another kind of revolutionary social transformation: the necessary but no less ethical rejection of

plenitude as the promise of utopian achievement" (95). Thus, in Nersessian's view, utopianism becomes a positive commitment to the idea and the value of limitation, a commitment that can also become a defining feature of resilience narratives.

The term "resilience" originates "from the Latin verb *resilire*, meaning to leap back, rebound, or return to form" after experiencing shock or disturbance; it is, more generally, "linked to the capacity of beings – human and nonhuman, individual or collective – to withstand adversity, to endure by being flexible, to adapt to conditions of crisis" (Fraile-Marcos 1). Initially used in materials science in the early 19th century, resilience later emerged as a key analytical concept across multiple academic disciplines in the 20th century. Scholarship by now distinguishes between two "parallel discourses . . . that might be termed 'psycho-social resilience' and 'socio-ecological resilience'" (Welsh 16). Psycho-social resilience discourse focuses on individuals and communities and their ability to "sustain health and psychological wellbeing in the face of continuing adversity" (17). Socio-ecological resilience discourse looks at ecological and, since the 1990s, at socio-ecological systems and their capacity to respond to disturbances by successfully transforming and reorganizing themselves.

Today, the concept has acquired a rather broad range of meanings. It has become a "traveling concept" (Bracke 55), which also extends into the realm of politics. Here, it has been prominently adopted by the political economy of neoliberal capitalism, which has shaped globalization since the 1980s. As political geographer Marc Welsh argues, in this context resilience has become "a structuring discourse of government," which is characterized, most importantly, by having "responsibilise[d] risk away from the state and on to individuals and institutions" (Welsh 17). Welsh defines the neoliberal resilient self as "autonomous and entrepreneurial" (16), as accepting uncertainty, risk, and adversity as unalterable conditions of life, and shouldering the responsibility for its well-being on its own. It is not supposed to challenge the socio-political or economic organization of neoliberalism, which rests on principles such as the deregulation, privatization, and expansion of markets and the cutback of state support for social services. Adaptability, flexibility, and persistence that are central when it comes to building resilience are fully individualized. Needless to say, the neoliberal resilience paradigm also turns a blind eye to the ecological costs our current globalized economy generates. In other words, it fails to address the impacts of ongoing global climate change in an environmentally responsible manner.

Resilience becomes a valuable analytical category for literary studies, including ecocriticism, if we adopt Michael Basseler's argument that all concepts of resilience are intrinsically narrative in nature. Any concept of resilience is "significantly constructed through narratives" (18), he argues, and he convincingly claims that the analysis of both factual and fictional texts allows us to better understand "how narratives

shape resilience and how resilience is essentially a narrative concept" (26). If we look at psycho-social resilience discourse, we can, for instance, see how "self-narratives enable people to overcome psychological crises and stress" (Neimeyer and Levitt qtd. in Basseler 20). If we look at socio-ecological resilience discourse, we can see that narratives can highlight change and transformation as central principles of ecology but also as indicative of the transformation societies have been undergoing due to the effects of climate change.

The convergence of various resilience discourses – psycho-social, socio-ecological, and political – offers a rich framework for interpreting climate change novels as "resilience narratives." It provides various lenses on what the literary texts communicate, most importantly, perhaps, drawing attention again and again to the relationality, interdependence, and reciprocity that have always defined human lives as integral parts of ecosystems and multispecies communities. Fictional resilience narratives can therefore be defined as stories that (a) depict partial adaptation to situations of crisis or disaster, (b) emphasize strategies, practices, and underlying values for coping with disasters in the present and preparing for future ones, and (c) articulate the capacity for transformative change, both individually and socio-ecologically – all features that give up the original meaning of the term resilience as conveying the notion of simply returning to a former, better state.

Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140*: The Resilience Narrative as Novel of the Collective

New York 2140 is set in New York City in the years 2140 to 2143. Much of the city is submerged in water, a consequence of the devastating effects of anthropogenic climate change. By 2140, sea levels have risen approximately 60 feet since the beginning of the 21st century, triggered by two "Pulses," massive flooding events caused by the melting of Antarctica's polar ice sheets due to global warming and the continuous increase in greenhouse gas emissions. The first Pulse occurs in the 2050s, "raising sea level by ten feet in ten years," as a result of which global trade and shipping systems break down and cause "a depression that was even more damaging to the people of that generation than the accompanying refugee crisis, which, using the unit popular at the time, was rated as fifty katrinas" (Robinson, *New York 2140* 139). The second Pulse occurs at the end of the 21st century, when "the total rise in sea level ended up at around fifty feet" and "thrashed all the coastlines of the world, causing a refugee crisis rated at ten thousand katrinas" (144). In its eight parts that each consists of several sections giving voice to the novel's major characters, *New York 2140* presents a set of characters of different class and ethnic backgrounds, who live in the partly drowned city and for whom building and practicing resilience is essential

for survival. They have to be creative and inventive to keep adapting to changing and challenging environmental conditions, both individually and collectively. Narrating the novel by employing a large number of voices turns *New York 2140* into what Andrew Rowcroft has called a "novel of the collective," a formal and thematic turn to be found especially in more recent Robinson novels such as *2312* and *The Ministry for the Future*, "in which individual identity and growth are replaced by collective activity and organization" (30). Similarly, focusing on the novel's goal to "take on the challenge of imagining new kinds of collectivity, and radical change" (1), David Sergeant reads this polyphony of voices as "an allegorical assemblage" (159) that links individual characters' attitudes and actions to overarching themes such as the struggle between the rich and the poor, between finance capitalism and democracy in the context of climate crisis. Read as a resilience narrative, I argue that *New York 2140*, as a novel of the collective, uses the narrative strategy of polyphony to formally express the key features of the concept of resilience the novel ultimately advocates. Firmly rooted in collective effort, solidarity, and cooperation, resilience becomes manifest in the partial adaptation to a situation of climate crisis many New Yorkers have achieved when the novel opens. It becomes manifest in the strategies that some of the protagonists successfully develop in the course of the novel to overcome the neoliberal capitalist sociopolitical order – the Capitalocene setting, as Stephanie Bender argues, drawing on Jason Moore's concept of capitalist world-making, "which foregrounds the entanglement of the human economy with the ecology of the planet" (71). In a plot development characterized by both "civil resistance" and "prodemocratic action" (Sergeant 163), the novel presents the capacity for transformative change and the ability to prepare for the future, thereby moving toward an optopia, an "optimum society."

While the novel also addresses the planetary dimension of climate change – for example, by portraying New York as one of the remaining global financial centers, engaging issues of global ecosystem change and biodiversity, or exploring worldwide climate migration – its primary focus is on the spaces of Manhattan. These are divided into three zones. Upper Manhattan, which lies significantly higher than the rest, has stayed dry. It has continued to attract investors and now parades so-called "super-scrapers" of unprecedented height and technological innovation, which are owned by the one-percent of the super-rich. Midtown Manhattan has become an intertidal zone, an area where the water comes and goes and where the survival or collapse of buildings has become a lucrative object of real estate speculation. It is here, where the working and middle classes live, people whose lives are relatively stable and secure, largely because they have permanent housing. Lower Manhattan, finally, has been permanently flooded, with its dilapidated buildings occupied mostly by squatters,

the large and still growing number of people, including climate refugees, that come to the city and are most vulnerable in terms of existential insecurity. Living conditions, especially the housing situation, in this future New York City are thus generally unstable and, for most inhabitants, highly precarious, as they have to struggle with resource scarcity, unprotected exposure to extreme weather events, and the enduring impact of a neoliberal political economy that has persisted beyond climate catastrophe. In 2140, New York City as well as the United States as a whole remain defined by a lack of adequate infrastructure and social services, placing the burden of risk squarely on individuals. New Yorkers are expected to live the neoliberal ideal of the "autonomous," resilient self, solely responsible for their own survival. Except for the super-rich, everyone in this future New York has to put up with the compounded effects of climate change, intricately linked with social inequality, violence, and corruption.

Engaging this dystopian scenario, the novel critically examines the neoliberal conception of resilience and its political and economic consequences for city inhabitants. It develops alternative political and economic principles that support a more equitable and sustainable way of organizing society. Despite and because of precarious conditions of living, the city and many of its inhabitants do display resilience, demonstrating adaptability, flexibility, and perseverance: By doing so, however, they ultimately show the transformative power of resilience. They replace neoliberal ideals in favor of a society and political economy that is characterized by solidarity, political cooperation, and economic regulation.

At the level of social organization, the novel suggests that personal as well as social resilience can only be effectively built if the neoliberal emphasis on individualism is massively qualified and, ultimately, replaced with a notion of the individual as firmly relying on group solidarity. The story follows the major characters, all of whom at some point live in the Met Building – a massive, former insurance building in the intertidal zone that now houses around 2,000 people and that can, as David Sergeant has pointed out, be regarded as a co-operative that "replaces the nuclear family as the building block for society" (181). Moreover, with its conversion to co-operative ownership, the building no longer symbolizes capitalist individualized protection but has, ironically, become a symbol of community-driven security. It is now jointly run by its residents, who share in its upkeep and benefit from the security, stability, and protection that co-operative membership offers. Life in the Met Building is far from "perfect"; resources are limited, and those who arrive late to the communal dining hall may have to make do with scraps or go without a meal entirely. While a stable housing situation is a privilege, rooms and apartments are rather small, and the

building is vulnerable to natural forces, extreme weather, and sabotage – all intensified by an economic system that encourages financial speculation on the housing market. The Met Building co-operative therefore lives an ethos of utopian minimalism, it has recalibrated the idea and value of perfection in a way that is suited to a planetary situation marked by instability and scarcity.

One of the novel's protagonists, Charlotte Armstrong, exemplifies the drive toward broader social change in particular. Serving as the co-op board's chairwoman, she eventually decides to run for Congress, aiming to bring the principle of solidarity to the national stage. Her election suggests the potential to introduce this ethos into a larger political framework. Charlotte is a character who enacts the attitude of angry optimism. Aware of the enormity of socio-ecological, especially climate-driven issues, but also strongly caring for current and future generations, she holds on to the belief that social, political, and economic change is possible. Angry optimism has become the driving force for her work as co-op chairwoman, as a lawyer and social worker for climate migrants that pour into New York City, and, finally, as an emerging politician. Charlotte is angry about the entrenched privileges of small affluent elites who resist change, who continue the manipulation of power through capital, thereby exacerbating the housing crisis in the city. She is also angry about the despair of her clients, hundreds and hundreds of undocumented people who have lost their digital citizenship records in the second Pulse. Listening to their stories, she "had to keep professional distance," even though "it was the thing that made her tired at the end of a day . . . Bone tired, and at some deep level, angry. Not at her clients, but at the system that made them so needy and so numerous" (Robinson, *New York 2140* 223–24). In all her endeavors, Charlotte – who has long realized that she feels "better working on things than not. I experience less stress" (10) – practices what can be described as "optimism of the will" in the midst of circumstances that could make her feel pessimistic. Ultimately, this attitude leads to success. Supported by the majority of the inhabitants, she prevents the Met Building from being sold on the global investment market, and, through her political involvement, is elected to a new Congress committed to economic reform.

At the level of politics and the economy, the novel thus suggests that building a resilient society requires a departure from neoliberal principles and unregulated market capitalism. Toward the end of the novel, a hurricane strikes New York, triggering an uprising against the wealthiest "one-percent" (Robinson, *New York 2140* 140) whose interests dominate the political system. Major characters – including Charlotte, Franklin Garr (a stockbroker), and Amelia Black (an internet nature documentary celebrity) – succeed in initiating a nationwide strike in which people refuse to pay bills, mortgages, and insurance premiums. This large-scale strike destabilizes the

economy massively and contributes to a radically new politics, involving the nation-alization of banks and a shift in the power dynamics in Congress. The excesses of neoliberal capitalism are curtailed and replaced by a political economy grounded in market regulation and sustainable, long-term investment. At the novel's end, at least for the moment, political power has returned to the people. They are still expected to demonstrate personal resilience, to be flexible, persistent, creative and inventive, but now as members of a society that begins to design an infrastructure that is able to reduce precariousness. In this context, resilience is no longer an individual burden but a shared societal goal.

Finally, resilience – and with it a sense of optimism – also shows at the ecological level, as the city's ecosystems demonstrate successful adaptation and persistence. While the novel addresses the dystopian reality of species extinction, notably in Ame-lia's development from internet celebrity to animal rights activist, it also portrays the resilience of the non-human world. In several passages, *New York 2140* presents an urban, socio-ecological ecosystem that underscores the interconnectedness of hu-mans and non-human nature, illustrating what Heise, in her discussion of the novel, describes as "the rebirth of waterborne biodiversity in and around New York" and as "a process of ecological restoration" (37):

> On the floors of the canals, the old sewer holes spew life from below. Up and down life floats, in and out with the tides. Salamanders and frogs and turtles proliferate among the fishes and eels, burrow in the mulm. Above them birds flock and nest in the concrete cliffs of the city. . . whales swim into the upper bay to birth their babies. . . Wolves and foxes skulk in the forests of the outer boroughs. . . River otters, mink, fishers, weasels, raccoons: all these citizens inhabit the world the beavers made from their version of lumber. Around them swim harbor seals, harbor porpoises. A sperm whale sails through the Narrows like an ocean liner. Squirrels and bats. The American black bear. They have all come back like the tide . . ." (Robinson, New York 2140 319–20)

This passage pays tribute to the robustness, the tenacity, the adaptability, and the resilience of non-human nature and shows that ecosystems do not return to a former state but constantly transform to reach a new, temporary kind of stability. However, the fact that the narrator of this passage talks about the animals as "all these citi-zens," adds an important dimension to the socio-ecological vision the novel presents. Including non-human animals into its reflections on what an ecologically sounder social and political world might look like, it hints at important epistemological and ontological arguments: Building resilience depends on the recognition of non-human nature's agency, on the fundamental relationality that characterizes human-nonhu-man nature entanglements.

The future vision of *New York 2140* articulates Robinson's notion of angry opti-mism. There is, on the one hand, anger about the missed chances of the past; there

is worrying about the present and the future, about unstoppable, continuing climate change. But, on the other hand, this anger does not dominate the novel. There may be "pessimism of the intellect," most notably in some of the sections presented by a character simply called "the citizen," who functions as chronicler of the city's political and environmental history and who critically, sometimes sarcastically analyses its present state. But there is also "optimism of the will," expressed by all major characters who are able to adapt to conditions of limitation, scarcity, and social inequity while finding the strength to effect positive transformation. These creative and resourceful characters point out a path toward a better society, an optopia, throughout the novel, as they actively work toward building a more equitable society. Charlotte, for example, enters politics and collaborates with Inspector Gen to fight corruption. Franklin invests "in the real economy" (Robinson, *New York 2140* 219), in "eelgrass housing" (286), i.e. in massive floating docks, the size of a Manhattan block, in the Intertidal Zone, to improve the housing situation. Their successes, at least for the time being, signal the novel's utopian minimalism. They reflect its attempt to re-calibrate the idea of perfection, moving away from notions of plenitude when responding to a planetary situation of "amplified instability and attenuated possibilities" (Nersessian 92). *New York 2140*, Robinson's novel of the collective, can thus be understood as yet another example of a fictional socio-ecological vision involving a massively reformed capitalist system that will allow for specific ways of resilience building. It shows what in a 2023 interview Robinson calls "the shapes of a solution," which "is very important for anybody that wants to have hope or everybody that is realizing that there will be humans after us, the generations to come" (qtd. in de Vicente).

Jenny Offill, *Weather*: The Personal Resilience Narrative

Jenny Offill's *Weather* is in many ways strikingly different from Robinson's *New York 2140*, a contrast made immediately apparent by several of its formal characteristics. First, Offill's novel, while also using New York City as setting, does not focus on a post-climate collapse future but on the early 21st century present that is marked by growing climate insecurity and heightened climate anxiety. Secondly, unlike Robinson, whose novel makes use of ten focalizers across its eight parts, incorporating both heterodiegetic and autodiegetic narration, as well as dialogue, to depict a narrative of social evolution, Offill relies exclusively on a single, first-person female voice in the six parts her novel comprises. Her protagonist writes a notebook, consisting of short entries that vary considerably in their typographical design as they present thoughts and observations, quotations from overheard conversations, interviews, podcast episodes, political speeches, as well as excerpts from email correspondence. Because of this structure *Weather* has repeatedly been categorized as a "social media

inflected novel" (Peinado-Abarrio 6), conveying with striking immediacy a sense of a contemporary United States in times of climate crisis from the perspective of a white, well-educated, middle-class woman. Thirdly, while the various voices in *New York 2140* create a readerly, easily accessible text that does not demand a high degree of reader participation in the process of meaning making, the fragmented narration of *Weather* generates a writerly text that demands a much more active role on the part of its readers. They must fill in the blanks between fragments, piece together plot lines, and identify thematic preoccupations, and by doing so actively participate in the narrator's intellectual and emotional development. Finally, there is a key difference between the novels since in *New York 2140*, early 21st century responses to climate change such as skepticism, denial or anxiety do not play a central role – climate collapse has already occurred, denial or skepticism have been disproven, and cognitive dissonance, a response that only the very wealthy can still afford to cultivate, is not thematically relevant for the novel's exploration of, most significantly, political and socio-ecological resilience. *Weather*, in contrast, engages deeply with issues of climate-related cognitive dissonance, denial, and anxiety, which shape the narrator-protagonist's responses throughout the narrative. At the same time, however, I argue that the novel also adopts a political stance of angry optimism and a sense of utopian minimalism, emphasizing the cultivation of personal resilience and, ultimately, suggesting a pathway toward broader social resilience.

The narrator, Lizzie, is a woman in her mid-forties, working as a librarian after giving up writing her dissertation. She is married to Ben, a former Classics scholar turned programmer of educational computer games, and the couple has a ten-year-old son, Eli. Lizzie also has a close relationship with her brother, Henry, who struggles with long-standing issues of depression, alcoholism, and medication addiction. One of the plot threads that unfolds in the novel explores her ongoing efforts to support and "stabilize" (Offill 133) Henry, who has become a father but feels unable to care for his baby daughter and eventually has to cope with the breakdown of his marriage. Lizzie's efforts to help Henry reflect a recurring pattern in her behavior – prioritizing others at the expense of her own needs and those of her husband and son, which ultimately leaves her vulnerable to depression. Rubén Peinado-Abarrio regards Lizzie and Henry's relationship as a "relation of mutual dependence that prevents their individual growth and threatens to fracture her marriage" (13). By the novel's end, however, Lizzie has managed to avoid being drawn into a downward spiral of depression; instead, she has experienced intellectual and emotional growth, which also strengthens her marriage.

Two other significant figures play important roles in Lizzie's life. The first is Sylvia, her former dissertation advisor, a professor of social sciences and cultural studies

whose work focuses on climate change. When Lizzie abandons her dissertation, Sylvia helps her secure a position at the library and later employs her to assist with her email correspondence. The second is Will, a war-zone journalist, recently returned from Syria, with whom she briefly contemplates having an affair but ultimately learns to value as a friend. During their short acquaintance, Will offers her perspective on the complicated family situation she has maneuvered herself into and helps her confront the anxieties that weigh heavily on her. The novel concentrates on the process in which Lizzie overcomes her most pressing anxieties and is able to gradually build personal resilience, allowing her to actively contribute to her community's efforts toward building collective resilience. A turning point in this process – and in the novel's plot development in general – is a presidential election closely modeled upon (though never explicitly stated as) the election of Donald Trump in 2016.

The fragments of Lizzie's notebook present a wide array of social, political, and economic challenges that afflict the deeply polarized contemporary United States. Taken together, these challenges turn *Weather* into a novel permeated by anxieties. Lizzie's more personal anxieties – about aging and parenting, for instance – are deeply intertwined with broader societal anxieties, for example, about income inequality and the lack of social services, ethnic tensions, the ongoing opioid crisis, and the risks associated with the medicalization of depression. The latter is critiqued as a particularly insidious byproduct of neoliberal capitalism, benefiting primarily the pharmaceutical industry and its shareholders. The novel even explicitly expresses a fear of a "descent into fascism" (Offill 117) following the unexpected election of a president who holds supremacist, racist, and antisemitic political positions. At one point, Lizzie asks her friend Will, the war-zone journalist, "Does this feel like a country at peace or at war?" His ominous reply underscores the tension that is palpable in the society: "[I]t feels the way it does just before it starts . . . Even while everybody's convincing themselves it's going to be okay, it's there in the air somehow" (Offill 165).

Finally, there is the pervasive theme of climate anxiety. The novel is saturated with fragments that show how omnipresent distress and worrying about the effects of ongoing global warming are in the social milieu in which Lizzie's life unfolds. Early on in the novel, we find the remark: "The moon will be fine, I think. No one's worrying about the moon" (Offill 7), a comment implying the need to direct one's concern toward the earth. A little further on, a fragment reads: "Young person worry: What if nothing I do matters? Old person worry: What if everything I do does?" (Offill 21–22). This reflection, following a lecture on the dangers of climate change, suggests Lizzie contemplating the contrasting ways different generations grapple with the urgency of developing practices that help to at least slow down climate change. At one point, Lizzie recalls a podcast episode in which the guest mentions "that many scientists

are in a state of barely suppressed panic about the latest data coming in. Their previous models were much too conservative. Everything is happening much faster than expected" (Offill 76). Somewhat later, she picks up the information that "New York City will begin to experience dramatic, life-altering temperatures by 2047" (Offill 106). The two quotations indicate the novel's engagement with the material agency of non-human nature – here referring to the eponymous weather – that highlights a growing awareness of ecological interdependencies, of the permeability of boundaries that separate the human and the non-human. The fear expressed here can be linked, moreover, to the question whether there are any "safe" places to relocate to, or to take your children to, once the climate collapses, which is repeatedly raised. Finally, while some fragments provide information about the risks of species extinction, others discuss the wealthy investing "in floating cities, the kind that can be anchored in international waters and run by unmeddlesome governments" (Offill 52). Thoughts like the latter signal the underlying socioeconomic and political dimensions of climate anxiety as well as the need for political reform and economic regulation. What all these notebook entries ultimately show is how constant exposure to scientific information about climate change but also, and maybe even more significantly, to societal responses of climate-related fear can amplify and exacerbate climate anxiety. They reveal how psychological phenomena such as vicarious trauma, "the cumulative emotional impact that results from empathic engagement with traumatic experiences" (Davenport 112-13), emerge in times of climate crisis, how they can influence a person's attitudes, emotional well-being, and coping abilities.

And yet, as the novel unfolds, this bleak outlook is continually counterbalanced by a political stance characterized by angry optimism and utopian minimalism. Lizzie's notebook entries keep reflecting her struggle against the depressing impact of climate anxiety, ultimately indicating a process of successfully building personal resilience. Central to this process is her evolving relationship with her mentor Sylvia, who for a long time represents angry optimism, embodying Robinson's point that "[g]iven our situation, I would recommend being fueled by dread, but also buoyed, and kept focused on the necessary work, by willed hope, as a political position" (qtd. in Mikes and New 231). As an academic, but also due to the many activities she undertakes to communicate the findings of climate science, she becomes "the character who most consistently shows not only a comprehensive awareness of the need to tackle the climate emergency, but also a determined disposition to make a difference" (Peinado-Abarrio 12). Through her scholarly work and wide-ranging outreach efforts – including delivering public lectures worldwide and hosting a podcast tellingly titled *Hell and High Water,* dedicated to the imminent climate catastrophe – Sylvia emerges as a driving force for change. She even attempts, albeit unsuccessfully, to persuade

her Silicon Valley podcast donors to fund a large-scale rewilding project. Peinado-Abarrio describes her as the novel's "moral compass," highlighting her posthumanist ethos and her vision of an interconnected reality where "human and non-human, nature and technology, are intertwined" (12). This ethos, grounded in a decentered view of humanity's role, expresses a complex yet hopeful approach to tackling climate crisis.

Sylvia is, for much of the novel, a character who demonstrates a high degree of personal resilience. Despite her comprehensive understanding of the dire realities revealed by climate science, she is able to draw upon the intellectual, emotional, and physical resources necessary to remain highly active, creative, and committed to convincing the public that something needs to be done. However, an intriguing plot twist reveals the limitedness of these resources, thereby firmly rejecting the notion that any one heroic figure – a "superman" or "superwoman" – can single-handedly rescue Earth from the unfolding climate crisis. After the presidential election, Sylvia experiences an onslaught of exhaustion, when she realizes that her political efforts have seemingly been rendered futile, "swept away with the stroke of a pen." She tells Lizzie that she wants to go "somewhere quiet and dark" (Offill 140) and then disappears for some time. When she comes back, Lizzie learns that she has started "to water her garden" (Offill 198), a decision echoing the end of Voltaire's *Candide.* There, the protagonist, after all his travels, has realized that he had uncritically relied on a naïve optimism that had blinded him to the hypocrisy, injustice, and absurdity of human disposition and society. In the context of the novel, the metaphor of cultivating one's garden can be read as representing a different kind of optimism – an angry optimism that combines sharp social and political critique with a determination to take responsibility for one's life by making something meaningful grow. Sylvia's gardening relates to the "community gardening" (Offill 19) that Lizzie and her family participate in and to the "community garden [Ben] was involved in" (Offill 188) at the time they met. Gardening emphasizes collaboration and community-building, highlighting a resource from which both personal and collective resilience can emerge. And it indicates utopian minimalism. "Perfection" here is not linked to "plenitude" but to smaller things, for instance, to the eggplant in the community garden that Ben, on their first date, tells Lizzy he "was having trouble with." While Lizzie cannot remember whether the plant needed "a little more rain or a little more sun," she does remember that he "had hopes for it though" (Offill 188), capturing the quiet optimism embedded in small acts of care and attention.

Sylvia's exhaustion thus points toward a critical cultural resource that is essential for sustaining personal but also psycho-social resilience amid the political conflicts she engages in: solidarity. Similar to what *New York 2140* suggests, this solidarity is

rooted in the recognition of the intricate interconnectedness of life on Earth and the need for an environmental ethics that transcends the human to encompass the non-human world. The belief in solidarity and relational thinking may offer an implicit answer to a question posed by a young woman after one of Sylvia's lectures in an early, one-line fragment, a question that is never directly answered: "How do you maintain your optimism?" (Offill 21).

The last pages of the novel reveal that Lizzie, like Sylvia, has come to draw upon solidarity as a vital resource, and in doing so seems to have found her "moral compass" within herself. Central to her transformation, i.e. central for understanding how she ultimately has learned to come to terms with her anxieties and become more resilient, is, again, the presidential election. In its immediate aftermath, when she observes people in her neighborhood as well as in the country as a whole being shocked and deeply worried about the new president's prospective policies, she writes in her notebook: "It was the same after 9/11, there was that hum in the air . . . Everyone everywhere talking about the same thing. In stores, in restaurants, on the subway" (Offill 113). A little later on, she adds: "I keep wondering how we might channel all of this dread into action" (Offill 137). From this point on, Lizzie intensifies her quest for stability and security, exploring both spiritual answers offered by different religions and practical strategies, such as survival techniques used by prepper communities. These efforts reflect her attempts to adapt to adverse conditions, remain flexible, and endure in times of crisis.

Her husband Ben also plays a role in encouraging Lizzie's growth, reminding her of her responsibilities to herself and her family with the maxim, taken from the Stoic philosopher Epictetus: "You are not some disinterested bystander / Exert yourself" (Offill 195). Signs of Lizzie actively confronting her fears and building resilience are evident when she, for instance, finally sees a doctor, after putting the appointment off for a long time, only to learn that her fears of illness are unfounded. Similarly, her decision to attend a Unitarian church service with her mother and to shake hands with members of the congregation marks a significant step in lowering her defenses against interactions with other people. She learns that while these interactions may provoke anxiety, they may also be a chance to experience solidarity.

The very last sentence of the novel, finally, leaves no doubt that relational thinking and the practice of solidarity are what will sustain Lizzie's personal resilience in the future. The last fragment picks up, again, an unanswered question, asked by Lizzie's mediation teacher, that was presented in an earlier fragment: "What is the core delusion? Margot asks the class, but nobody knows the right answer, and she doesn't bother to tell us" (Offill 193). In the very last fragment, the very last sentence of the novel, Lizzie seems to have found the answer: "The core delusion is that I am here

and you are there" (Offill 201). This realization underscores her recognition of interconnectedness as the key to sustaining resilience and navigating the challenges ahead.

Resilience Narratives, the Climate Crisis, and Utopian Writing: Epistemological, Ontological, and Ethical Implications

Read as resilience narratives that are driven by angry optimism and utopian minimalism, *New York 2140* and *Weather* explore experiences of climate crisis in ways that emphasize transformation, solidarity, and hope. The two novels represent two distinct but complementary kinds of resilience narratives. *New York 2140*, on the one hand, relying on a multiplicity of voices, is a resilience narrative of the collective. It focuses on the resilience of communities and socio-ecological systems in a future setting that has been and still is confronted with the complex challenges of climate change. It proposes that transformation toward a more sustainable, environmentally just political and economic order can only develop via collective action, solidarity, and co-operative engagement, based on an understanding that recognizes the interconnectedness of all life. *Weather*, on the other hand, focuses on personal resilience, largely in a context of climate anxiety and political instability that manifests in psychological crisis. Here, resilience is framed as an intimate, introspective process. The novel's fragmented form emphasizes a process of tentative transformation that reveals how climate change can affect an individual's mental, emotional, and psychological life. It shows that it needs trust in others and in yourself to develop a stable resilient self that leaves the autonomous resilient self of neoliberalism behind and becomes ready for participating in acts of solidarity and cooperation.

Moreover, *New York 2140* and *Weather*, as resilience narratives, share core epistemological, ontological, and ethical perspectives. Epistemologically, both novels challenge the neoliberal concept of the entrepreneurial, self-interested individual, whose major function is to stabilize the political and socioeconomic system; instead, they imagine the individual as fundamentally shaped by cooperation and solidarity. This epistemological shift calls for a new understanding of freedom, which, as Elizabeth R. Anker observes, has long served to justify capitalist practices, particularly in North America, and thus has provided a critical ideological foundation of the climate crisis. Anker contends that the current "normative ideal of freedom" is rooted in notions of "control over nature, individual sovereignty," and "human exceptionalism" (149), which must be replaced by an alternative ideal grounded in an understanding of the "co-constituting relations of life" (150), relations that inherently entail certain limitations. Ontologically, therefore, both novels reject an anthropocentric view of the world, suggesting instead that humans are deeply entangled with the non-human

world in complex, multispecies relationships. This decentering of humanity allows for a more inclusive understanding of resilience, one that embraces ecological and social interdependence without losing sight of the specific accountability and moral responsibility privileged members of more privileged societies have had over time. Ethically, both novels advocate for a moral framework that includes non-human nature, emphasizing practices of solidarity, care, and collective action as central to resilience-building. Angry optimism feeds this ethical stance, balancing the acknowledgment of uncertainty, instability, and profound loss with the determination to act, adapt, and transform. Utopian minimalism complements this perspective, advocating for sustainable, restrained approaches to life that take ecological and social realities fully into consideration. By embracing limitations and finding value also in small, collective actions, the novels underscore the potential for ethical transformation.

By presenting resilience as a transformative, relational process that allows both individuals and communities to actively and successfully deal with the impacts of climate change, to re-calibrate life "to a planetary situation of amplified instability and attenuated possibilities" (Nersessian 92), both novels, regardless of their differences in terms of narrative form, character focus, as well as temporal and spatial scale, offer a utopian sense of possibility in the midst of crisis and uncertainty. While a lot more work needs to be done on the contribution of climate resilience narratives to the utopian tradition of environmental writing, *New York 2140* and *Weather* certainly represent what Lisa Garforth, discussing green utopias since the 1990s, called "a modest, grounded and pragmatic utopianism." In *Weather*, this utopianism "thread[s] its way through small actions, keeping open the possibility of surprising change," *New York 2140* demonstrates that "[I]n the hands of a utopian science fiction writer, adaptation can even be figured as radically transformative" (100). Analyzing climate fiction by applying the lens of resilience – in its multiple meanings developed by psycho-social, socio-ecological, and political resilience discourses – provides a unique way of understanding how our present and our possible futures are related and how a more just and sustainable future can be imagined. This future recognizes losses and vulnerabilities, but at the same time embraces the complexities of ecological interconnectedness and fosters optimism, hope, and the potential for meaningful change.

About the Author

Sylvia Mayer is chair of American Studies and Anglophone Literatures and Cultures at the University of Bayreuth, Germany. Her major research areas are Ecocriticism, environmentally oriented literary and cultural studies, and African American Studies.

Her publications include monographs on Toni Morrison's novels and on the environmental ethical dimension of New England Regionalist Writing, 1865–1918. She has edited and co-edited several volumes, among them *The Anticipation of Catastrophe: Environmental Risk in North American Literature and Culture* (with Alexa Weik von Mossner) and *Restoring the Connection to the Natural World: Essays on the African American Environmental Imagination.* Over the last years, her ecocritical work has focused on the cultural and literary imagination of (global) environmental risk. Her study of climate change fiction and petrofiction as environmental risk narratives has more recently been complemented by an additional focus on the concept of resilience.

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