



# CLIMATE JUSTICE AND ECOLOGIES OF INEQUALITY IN BARBARA KINGSOLVER'S *PRODIGAL SUMMER* AND KIM STANLEY ROBINSON'S *NEW YORK 2140*

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## Abstract

This article analyses how climate justice and social inequality are portrayed in two contemporary novels: Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* and Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140*. While the former depicts rural settings with the focus on the present-day problems, the latter portrays urban scenarios of the future following a devastating catastrophe. Both novels demonstrate that climate disasters exacerbate the already existing social inequalities in society. Set in rural southern Appalachia, Kingsolver's book illustrates a farmer's struggle to balance profit and environmental conservation. According to Kingsolver, rural people need to attract greater attention because they are not discussed during climate change negotiations but are much more vulnerable to environmental problems. Conversely, Robinson's *New York 2140* depicts a submerged Manhattan reimaged as a "Super-Venice", where the actual elevation of a residence reflects its occupant's socio-economic standing. Robinson criticises global finance capital's attempts to turn environmental disasters into commodities, making rising sea levels a new place for gentrification. This article looks at the characters' journeys and the physical settings of both novels to show that both authors see climate justice not just as a technical or scientific problem to be solved but as a social project based on community resilience, closing the wealth gap, and fundamentally rethinking how people interact with the natural world. These two novels assert that it is impossible to significantly alter the world without dealing with the social inequalities that are a big part of our time.

**Keywords:** climate justice, social inequality, Barbara Kingsolver, Kim Stanley Robinson, Appalachia, urban ecology, sustainability.

## Introduction

At present, it is difficult to dissociate the environmental sustainability of Earth from its human occupants. Historically, environmentalism was often considered a hobby of the privileged who did not have to concern themselves with obtaining basic resources like food or shelter. Climate justice, on the other hand, illustrates that the most vulnerable individuals tend to be the ones contributing the least to global warming. In essence, the dilemma of saving the environment versus humanity forms the core of two compelling novels, namely *Prodigal Summer* by Barbara Kingsolver and *New York 2140* by Kim Stanley Robinson.

In her work, Kingsolver explores the mountainous regions of the humid south of Appalachia. Unlike many dystopian tales, her novel does not revolve around an impending catastrophe. Instead, she concentrates on the unrestrained beauty of nature and the threats to its preservation posed by human selfishness and economic pressures. Using three interconnected narrative threads, the author describes the plight of rural communities forced into destructive exploitation due to the dwindling tobacco industry. Conversely, Robinson fast-forwards several decades into the future, when two massive events of sea-level rise have submerged much of New York City in water. The affluent inhabit state-of-the-art “sky-villages” situated above the waterline, creating a palpable socioeconomic divide.

The common thread linking these two works of literature is that the solution to the environmental problem lies in treating others better. This is achieved through climate justice. These questions include ‘Who can survive? Who can have fresh air? Who can reside on dry land? And finally, who suffers when disaster strikes? By analysing how these authors present their narratives, we realise that the underlying social aspects of the environmental issue have become obvious.

### Rural Resilience and Ecological Justice in *Prodigal Summer*

The introduction of *Prodigal Summer* adds life to the region by making it an active element. There are moths, coyotes, and chestnuts in the land that are interconnected in a web of invisible strings and make up its unique landscape. The natural beauty in question is being undermined by social disparity, however, and the residents of the area are not wealthy individuals; rather, they are farmers and rangers trying to cope within the harsh framework of an industrial society.

For example, there is a story of Lusa Landowski, a girl from the city who joined the ranks of a farming family due to marriage. Having lost her husband, she found herself in charge of the farm despite being a stranger to it and was met with suspicion by her in-laws. Being present at the scene, one cannot help noticing how class plays a role in determining the state of the environment. Lusa views the farm not merely as a source of income but as a vibrant ecosystem operating in her immediate vicinity. The farm’s environment is harsh, and the farmers are in debt and rely on the chemical industry for pesticides.

This is where the "justice" part of climate justice comes in. Zebulon’s farmers are victims of a global system that prioritises profits over human lives and land. Lusa opposes the practices of big ag by replacing tobacco production with goat raising to supply the city’s need for authentic ethnic products, choosing a lifestyle that respects nature and can sustain her without depleting her resources.

The next character to mention is Deanna Wolfe, a forest ranger who camps solo atop the mountain, witnessing the comeback of the coyotes to their territory. Through her viewpoint, the conflict between the educated environmentalist and the local hunter becomes obvious. From the valley's perspective, the coyote is considered a cattle killer; however, for Deanna Wolfe, the return of these animals signifies the health of the forest and its flora. The conflict reveals the connection between social inequality and the truth about the two sides of nature. While for the poor farmer, the coyote represents a disaster, for the government-supported biologist whose daily routine is entirely different from that of the farmers, the animals' return stands for nature's miracle.

### **The Sunken City: Wealth and Water in *New York 2140***

While Barbara Kingsolver's world is characterised by verdant mountain ranges, Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* presents an urban environment filled with the "dizzying blues" of flooding waters. The city of New York is described as a "super-Venice". While the cityscape has radically changed, becoming a maze of canals and losing its subway transportation system, the social hierarchy remains depressing in its sameness. Through his vision of flooding Manhattan, Robinson wants to emphasise that climate change does not reset inequalities between different groups in society; rather, it aggravates them.

In the post-apocalyptic world that Robinson creates, life takes place in the "intertidal" zone. The inhabitants have developed the necessary adaptation mechanisms—they use vaporetos as a form of transportation, construct skybridges to connect the tops of buildings, and cultivate communal grit as a survival mechanism. Nevertheless, at all times, they are threatened by "super-gentrification.". Even though the planet is drowning, the stock exchange market is still looking for opportunities to capitalise on the tragedy. Their goal is to buy out the buildings in the intertidal zone, evict the "squatters" who used to live there, and convert the land into luxurious high-end real estate for the global elite.

Franklin Garr, a high-frequency trader, is another character whose story provides insight into a phenomenon known as "disaster capitalism". He creates an index by which people can wager on whether the flooded real estate will stay stable or not. This is a rather cynical and, at the same time, highly ingenious description of the mechanisms by which the elite transform a global disaster into financial transactions. On the one hand, there are inhabitants of lower floors who try to keep the flood back by means of buckets and dams. Meanwhile, Franklin Garr sits in his air-conditioned office and transfers millions of dollars, according to the possible increase in the value of these houses a week later.

It should be said that the social message conveyed through the novel is revealed in the stories of characters like Vakeel, a social worker, as well as two "water rats", Mutt and Jeff. In contrast to Franklin, who makes money on the misfortunes of other people, these three characters are the heroes who do their best to maintain social order. They understand that the real state of affairs in the submerged New York is as follows: a lack of habitable space, food insecurity, and the way the law is used to protect the property of the rich while ignoring the lives of the poor. Robinson's New York is a place where "climate justice" is a battleground. It's not just about building better dikes; it's about who owns the city and who gets to decide its future.

## Capital, Commodification, and Climate Justice

The tense interplay between capitalism and ecology is a fascinating theme in both texts. Although this theme is expressed in vastly divergent ways within the two novels, at their core lies the idea that the capitalist system not only contributes to environmental degradation but exacerbates economic disparity as well. To truly enact climate justice, we must address issues of capitalism alongside environmentalism.

While in *New York 2140*, capitalism takes on more traditional forms of large corporations, in *Prodigal Summer*, its presence is more subtle. Instead of being depicted via giant corporations, capitalism shows up in the form of economic pressure and structures which govern the lives of people living in rural areas. The farmers in Appalachia live a precarious lifestyle where they must always worry about debt and fluctuations in the market. Even the application of chemical pesticides is dictated not necessarily by choice but by the need to ensure survival and maintain a constant yield. Slowly, characters such as Lusa start to comprehend that what seems like an individual choice is a much bigger system that focuses on quantity rather than harmony with nature. In this way, Lusa's conversion into raising goats and following environmentally friendly procedures does not just become an ecological move but a form of resistance against a capitalist structure.

The novel *New York 2140* shows us a picture of the future, where capital gains an even stronger position due to the changing nature of economic life. For instance, after the flood, Manhattan does not stop functioning. Rather, people there use all their efforts to make money out of the catastrophe. Thus, such concepts as disaster capitalism become more tangible through the image of Franklin Garr. Living spaces in flooded areas turn into a commodity and become a subject for investment and gambling for people who possess some capital.

The connection between capitalism and ecological crisis in both novels lies in the fact that capitalism does not just co-exist in this situation but actually constructs such crisis. In rural Appalachian areas, the necessity to provide one's income and earn money makes people exploit natural resources and destroy nature. However, they are aware of this fact. Similarly, New York residents who live above the water level are able to survive using various means.

This common critique strengthens the overall case for climate justice: problems concerning the environment cannot be separated from the wider picture of the social and economic system. Technological solutions or policies alone, without considering underlying disparities, will inevitably fail in resolving such problems. The common message from Kingsolver and Robinson's stories is that any transformation needs to include changes in human interaction with the environment as well as society's approach to resource management and distribution.

### Bridging the Divide: Human Agency and Systemic Change

When considered together, the theme becomes apparent. First, both authors seem to argue that the prevailing system based on competition, extraction, and the accumulation of capital is incompatible with sustainability. In the case of Kingsolver's novel, the "enemy" transforms into silent industrial chemicals as well as the economic conditions which drive farmers to treat their land as though it were simply one giant

mine. In Robinson's work, the "enemies" are more obvious: financial institutions, seeing in a flooded-out city just another "emerging market".

In both novels, the remedy is similar and not found in labs or corporate offices. That remedy is the "commons". In *Prodigal Summer*, the conflict resolves itself when the characters involved realise that they must share a certain knowledge. At first, Nannie Rawley and Garnett Walker were two old neighbours who had a history of arguing over such issues as pesticides and religion. But the couple learns to overcome those differences because of their common love for the land and their wish to restore the majestic American chestnut tree to the mountains. In essence, they find "justice" in being good neighbours to one another and to the earth.

The *New York 2140* author proposes a much more drastic and political solution. In the end, the inhabitants of the Met Life Tower, which is a cooperative structure where people from different classes live together, organise a "householders' strike". They understand that the financial system can work only when they keep on paying into it. By withholding their rent and mortgage payments after a catastrophic hurricane hits the city, they compel the city to adopt a new approach to governance. The city's banks must be nationalised, and its affairs should be conducted according to the interests of its inhabitants.

This marks the essence of climate justice in both works discussed above. Climate justice means that the environmental issue can be solved only collectively. An environmentally friendly world is impossible as long as some people live in poverty, since those individuals will always be forced to act against the environment for survival.

## Conclusion

Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* and Robinson's *New York 2140* must be included in any attempt to understand what makes the issue of climate change so deeply human. In her book, Kingsolver presents the slow, creeping tragedy of rural inequality, in which people constantly sacrifice nature's beauty in exchange for just a little bit more time to survive economically. Robinson paints a picture of the future filled with urban inequality, with the height of the skyscrapers showing the depth of the gap between its residents.

Despite their differences, both authors agree that climate justice is the solution to the crisis. Engineering solutions will not solve anything because the root of the problem lies in the inequality present in our social and economic systems.

The stories of those individuals who resist being victims, from farmers who adopt sustainable farming methods to social workers who defend the rights of the submerged classes to communities who discover the art of dialogue amongst themselves, serve these authors to draw out the map of the future. It allows these authors to suggest that as the world undergoes the changes brought about by climate change, there is hope that our societies can also transform. However, the path to sustainability is not solely dependent on our efforts to protect the environment and the natural resources of our planet; it also requires ensuring that everyone, regardless of class or race, has an equal voice.

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