Teaching Fiction's Futures: Pedagogy for Climate-Changed Global Politics

Using novels and films to explore international relations is not a new idea. Countless conference panels, monographs, edited collections, and even textbooks are organized around precisely this premise: scholars and students alike can learn a lot from thinking about global politics through the lens of fiction. This article is certainly a contribution to the previous work done building on that premise. However, it is different as well. While this essay continues that work to some degree, it also explores how fiction can be not only useful to achieve pedagogical goals but can be pedagogical itself, particularly in the context of climate-changed global politics. This article aims to show, through the discussion of examples from the author's teaching experience using the novels*American War* and *The Years of Rice and Salt* and the films *Elysium* and *Snowpiercer*, that the use of fiction for pedagogical purposes can help professors and teachers rethink their pedagogy in more critical and transformative ways.

It should be further noted that neither this essay, nor the critical pedagogy it articulates, is aimed at convincing those skeptical of climate change. In general, there is no reason to think that most people who articulate criticisms of the fundamental truth of anthropogenic climate change are contributing to the discussion in good faith. With students however, it is best to assume that they are contributing in good faith, but based on 'facts' produced by others who are not working in good faith; in other words, when students offer climate-skeptical views in class, it is likely they've been pre-persuaded by an industry that is surely, provably, not acting in good faith. This is of course a problem, but it is one that is best solved by allowing other students to rebut their classmates' claims, supplemented by a collaborative exploration of the current research. Good or bad faith aside, no student (or person in general—assuming they're not a CEO of a fossil fuel company or one of their purchased politicians), should be made to feel ashamed or unintelligent for holding incorrect views on the science of climate change. Professional teaching standards aside, as*American War*, which will be explored below, teaches us: condescension and derision are often politically and intellectually counter-productive.

What follows are reflections on my experience using the aforementioned novels and films to help my students develop their critical understanding of climate-changed global politics in different, albeit somewhat overlapping, ways. The books and films discussed here have been used in a variety of courses, sometimes, but not always, together (though I have never used all four together in the same course). Just as the function of these fictions in the classroom exceeds the classroom, my hope is that the reflections here will be useful to those engaged in the daily pedagogy of political activism and organizing, and that the words here provide inspiration rather than mere repetition—though of course, feel free to repeat as is useful in your own pedagogical context, whether it is in a classroom, a living room with family or friends, at a dive bar, or on a picket line.

American War: From Today's to Tomorrow's Climate-Changed Politics

What might a climate-changed world extrapolated from the present look like absent any big technological development that can, in theory, reverse or halt the effects of atmospheric carbon (and other relevant greenhouse gas) levels? One of the most productive pedagogical angles that Omar El Akkad's debut novel *American War* offers is that it is told primarily from the perspective of the American South, which as with the actual South in the US Civil War, is portrayed to represent what the reader is expected to view as backwards, harmful, and factually off-base

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views. In this story, the South supports the continued use of fossil fuels, which have been unilaterally banned by the federal government (dominated by the North). In context however, the North ostensibly represents the readers' perspective on what is normatively desirable when it comes to climate change, but is clearly not the 'good guy'. Northern liberals are portrayed as manipulative, elitist, self-interested, and cruel. The country created by the ban on fossil fuel is hardly some sustainable utopia. It is a grotesque hellscape, but not one that is at all devoid of complex institutional politics, which makes *American War* something of a rethinking or reversal of many postapocalyptic tropes (e.g., those reflected in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, the *Mad Max* universe, or even the much reviled but nonetheless lovable *Waterworld*, which have politics but a simple non-institutional neo-feudal warlord-type politics).

The pedagogical beauty of *American War* is that it offers conservative students a way into a topic of discussion that is often exceptionally difficult for them to engage with, other than antagonistically (And why? Because they feel, perhaps not unjustifiably, that the content itself is hostile to their worldview). *American War* however doesn't entertain or allow for climate skepticism. It is the resonant portrayal of Northern liberals, portrayed only marginally more stereotypically than the Southerners, that allows conservative students to feel like they don't need to be on the defensive with this book. At the same time, American War also offers liberal-leaning students a non-humiliating path towards humility. They can be 'right' all they want about the science of climate change, but that hardly gives them any kind of monopoly on knowing the right path towards a more just and ecologically-sustainable planet.

And not to leave out the budding left-wing radicals in our classrooms, *American War* offers them something missing in many college classrooms (despite what Tucker Carlson and the Fox News/right-wing mediasphere would have us believe), a book that confirms their inclinations about the limitations of status quo thinking and establishment politics and doesn't make them feel pressured to moderate their views lest *they* be (unironically apparently) accused of idealism. The book however also fails to give the radical viewpoint a free pass; after all, in a future where liberals and conservatives destroy each other, the socialist left doesn't necessary win—it is quite possible that everyone loses. The novel also presents a strong critique of individual 'terroristic' and systematic, organized military violence, both criticized primarily as tools for political advantage. Genuine self-defense is never demeaned, but it is also never shown to have any kind of revolutionary or (positively) transformational political potential. Thus, even if the liberals and conservatives are wildly off-base in their politics, the path towards a more radically transformed global political economy is left open.

Students can even be prompted to realize how and why they connect with the text in these ways. I accomplish this by asking who the intended audience of the book is. Once they get to the task of providing examples and evidence for their determination, they realize the uniqueness of the approach Akkad is taking. More generally, teaching through open-ended discussions based on the students' own questions and my own prompts (some of which are based on the above comments), in the classroom, *American War* represents a multifaceted opportunity for students, whatever their politics, to imagine a different climate-changed politics than the one we have and are in danger of continuing.

Elysium: We're not in this together, necessarily—at least not yet

Neill Blomkamp's 2013 film *Elysium* is perhaps the perfect encapsulation of the critique of the idea that despite all our global political and economic differences, climate change is the one thing that will affect everyone—that climate change is some kind of *ur*-enemy humanity can unite against. Though the film is less specifically about climate change per se, it is certainly implicit—or at least allegorically resonant in that context. However one evaluates the literal presence of climate change in the film, it is absolutely a film about a global-political climate-changed future. The rich escape the overpopulated, desiccated earth to a space station with a self-contained verdant biosphere (of course equipped with violent artillery to keep out the earth residents who may manage to travel off the surface to the station). *Elysium* is a film about climate migration, likely to be one of the central political issues of a climate-changed global politics. The rich, who are portrayed as being racially and linguistically diverse, use force to keep the earth migrants out. There are disagreements among the politicians of Elysium as to what degree of force is acceptable to maintain the autonomy and exclusivity of the station. Yet, even the President of the station (a person of color), who questions the hyper-aggressiveness and quick trigger finger of the Secretary of Defense (a woman), isn't ever shown to question the systemic inequalities at play and how they are reproduced by the existence of the station.

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Additional pedagogical value of the film comes from its ending. There is something of an individual heroism that students are drawn to as well, but the biggest point of critique that has the deepest educational merit has to do with the technological fix that concludes the film. Everyone on Earth is made a citizen of Elysium on paper. The system is rebooted and droves of medical shuttles with healing technology are sent to Earth to heal the population. The healing medical bays are shown throughout the film, but they are presented as being scarce, only available on the Elysium station. Yet, when the computer hack is completed and all people on Earth are made citizens of Elysium, many attentive viewers, are left incredulous: why the hell did the space station already have so many medical ships and robots available to serve the whole planet? This is often viewed as an allegorical representation of the hoarding of resources of the global elites in our present. From that perspective, the ending is pedagogically useful, particularly for students who may genuinely believe in the natural scarcity of basic necessities today. Other students will usually quickly come to the allegorical reading just mentioned: scarcity is artificial (both materially untrue for the most part but where it is true it is the product of intentional choices of empowered peoples across time and space). The allegory works at a somewhat superficial level though. Usually, some students will take the discussion a bit further.

Every semester I've used this film, at least one student asks why these medical ships were ready to go, beyond symbolism. Our discussion proceeds, discussing the political function of this use of *deus ex machina*, which is quite interesting. But, I try to guide them from there to think about what scarcity means politically. Yes, it can be a fact of reality (i.e., there is only so much X), but it also immediately raises the ethical distributional question: why do the citizens of Elysium have any more right to a hospitable (and hospital-ed) habitat than the people on Earth?

Students also often ask why wouldn't the original citizens of Elysium simply undo the changes to the computer system and limit citizenship again? Productively, the film offers no answer to this. This is where the students, particularly those who were politically-inspired by the critical edge of the film, are left frustrated. So, even if we accept that scarcity is fundamentally artificial and that the wealthy use force (and ideology to some degree) to maintain an unjust but beneficial (to them) distribution of resources, technology isn't a fix. I then ask students who technology is working for in the film. Obviously, from the outset, technology seems like it is working great for the citizens of Elysium. It isn't that the question of technology is irrelevant. What we are able to invent is important, but more important politically is who technology serves—and who it could serve instead (or in addition to)?

An activity that has worked well, after discussing the film as a class, is groupwork wherein students have to come up with a way to solve the following problems: absent the existence of the thousands and thousands of medical shuttles and medical bays that if Elysium were real, the rich would have absolutely no need for (and likely wouldn't exist in those quantities), what would the solution be? And then, how can the citizens of Earth prevent the citizens of Elysium from de-naturalizing them after they've all been made citizens? The proposals students come up with rarely overlap with each other, within a specific class or even across semesters. *Elysium* offers less of an answer to any particular question than it offers a range of vital questions to a set of often uninterrogated answers.

Snowpiercer: Technology can't save us, because technology isn't our problem

Bong Joon-ho's *Snowpiercer* asks some similar questions to Blomkamp's *Elysium*, while being more specifically centered on what climate-changed politics might look like in the future. Unlike *Elysium* and *American War*, there is very little formal politics presented in the film. However, there are certainly politics in the agonist or Schmittian sense: friend/enemy distinctions galore, though these divisions are problematized and undermined over the course of the film.

Snowpiercer also, in a vein similar to *Elysium*, elucidates a politics of class that is complicated by gender and race. In *Elysium*, there is a more obvious diversity among the elite. However, *Snowpiercer*'s elites are less diverse. These is some linguistic and (visible) racial diversity shown, but a question I ask of students is why there is so little diversity across the whole of the train? Perhaps, as one student speculated, Wilford is a white supremacist. Perhaps, though we don't see much evidence for that (which was the response of another student to this suggestion). The question remains, but it is answerable in the same way that the question as to why the poor people ended up in the back in such horrible conditions is answered. Students are more than capable of clarifying these issues amongst themselves. I guide them to speak to each other's confusion and concerns collaboratively. The prevailing conclusion that is often

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reached by the students is that the conditions that are reflected on Wilford's train are more or less analogous to the conditions on the planet prior to "humanity's" attempt to fix climate change technologically (which of course backfires spectacularly). Students raise questions about the opening lines of the film. Who decided that the technology (CW-7) would be deployed? Who decided how the train would be divided up? And though this first emerged from a student, in later semesters, when the question hasn't emerged organically, I've raised it.

Students of all kinds tend to struggle a bit with two key aspects of this film that are crucial to struggle with. Preliminarily, it is important to emphasize that struggling with these issues is not a problem at all. It is one of the goals. Students usually start off sympathetic to the equilibrium/overpopulation arguments deployed by Wilford and other front-enders, even after being shown how much (food, resources, entertainment, luxuries, services, etc.) are available for those not in the back of the train. Generations of mostly well-meaning overpopulation arguments have had their toll, but what *Snowpiercer* allows us to really pierce in the classroom is problematic assertions of scarcity (adjacent to overpopulation) alongside unequal distribution. Some students are sympathetic to the idea that such extreme deprivation of (the) many justified the eventual destruction of the train. That is, if a just distribution is not possible, life together is meaningless for Curtis and everyone in the back of the train. The big question is whether equilibrium can be maintained with an entirely different distributional arrangement, assuming we take the existence of scarcity seriously (on the train to start, but more broadly in our world as well). Discussions often turn to the function of and relationship between ideology and violence. Students don't need to have read Althusser to see how this works in the film.

One further question I have found value in exploring with students is, what would happen if the technology had worked? If it had reversed climate change, what would the politics of that world look like? Most students suggest that the world would return to what preceded the climate-changing world. An easy out that I allow limitedly. But that doesn't exactly tell us why that would be the case. So, I follow-up, what would need to happen to blunt the reversion, to build a non-recursive future, post-climate change? Well, it turns out this discussion is, perhaps obviously, immediately a discussion about how we can work within the context of climate-changing politics today. That isn't the end either though. Predictably, many students revert to individualistic suggestions about aggregated personal behaviors. This is where one or two short articles on the recycling industry, greenwashing, or on the relative responsibility for resources usage and carbon emissions (as is now well known, something like one hundred corporate entities are responsible for 70-80% of the global carbon emissions)—some pesky non-fiction can help shape the conversation in ways that avoid these individualistic conclusions being the last word.

The Years of Rice and Salt: Past is prologue, not destiny

Kim Stanley Robinson's 2003 book *The Years of Rice and Salt* doesn't tell a teleological narrative of how history would have been entirely different if the vast majority of Europeans were killed in the Black Death and Christianity and Christianity-informed politics, economics, and culture hadn't come to dominate the development of world history. Some people read the book that way. I don't want to say it is an incorrect reading, but it is certainly one that leaves out a lot of counterposed events and, more pedagogically-relevant, it is not the most productive one to get students to think differently about their relationship to the past and present. In fact, *The Years of Rice and Salt* tells an alternative history of the world after the Black Death that does portray a different history than the one that actually occurred. It is one that is not dominated by Europe (neither in its fictional history, nor the imaginative historiography it deploys).

It is true that *The Years of Rice and Salt* offer us a vision of a different history of humanity wherein indigenous peoples of North American were not the horrific victims of settler colonialism and the related extractivist violence of capitalism. We see a world where other cultures, religions, and societies flourish. And yet, problems war, poverty and inequality, ecological degradation, and political disagreement remain. Terrible atrocities and structural injustices are just as much a part of the alternative history as our actual history—well, perhaps not as much. Things proceed differently but not entirely so. Simply because more Christian Europeans die than other kinds of peoples, doesn't mean that power imbalances and preventable harms and deprivations cannot occur. They are still, as ever, a complex result of individual choices and structural conditions. This novel certainly opens up space to explore that relationship in deep detail.

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The Years of Rice and Salt isn't, as *Elysium* isn't, explicitly about climate-changed politics. And yet, it is implicitly about exactly that. We cannot change how many people died of the Black Death any more than we can change the number of people who have already been killed by COVID-19 (and the prevailing, if still variably, capitalistic response to it), nor can we change the damage already done to the climate, and as the previous discussions here have shown, even if we could change such damage technologically, the world such a technology would be intervening in would produce less radical change than is often acknowledged by futurists of different stripes. Students see the contours of a post-/de-colonial critique in Robinson's story, and yet they are prevented from coming to any kind of utopian conclusion. Sure, maybe non-Europeans would have been less violent than other societies had they been allowed to develop absent the distorting influence of European colonialism, but simply not being European is hardly enough. And that isn't to suggest that this is what post-colonial or de-colonial thought actually suggests. Still, it is sometimes the implicit conclusion of some superficial readers and plenty of novice students. Different doesn't mean better or worse, necessarily. All of that said, it is worth thinking critically about how our present and future would be different if indigenous peoples who generally (though not universally) place great importance on their communities' entangled relationships with the non-human living world had not been systematically wiped out.

The group activity that can work well with this issue, and opens up great opportunities for other related conversations, has students try to make as many parallels between the political, economic, and cultural events and developments as possible. The subsequent discussion prompts students in each of the groups to explore the potential meanings of the convergences and divergences. One of the consistent outcomes of this discussion is another question: how does the past—and our understandings of it—affect how we view the present and the future? To paraphrase Marx, people make history but not under conditions of their own choosing. True enough—but*The Years of Rice and Salt* helps students ask another question: how? By thinking through controversial historical alternatives, these "what-ifs" in history, students are encouraged to speculate about what different choices we could make today and tomorrow.

Conclusion: Pessimism & Hope

Students can learn facts easy enough. We can test their knowledge of these facts through exams and essays. We can see their knowledge and feel that we've done a good job. However, a critical pedagogy aimed at a more radically democratic transformational politics takes something more, or at least different. Yes, students need to be given the opportunity and academic incentive to learn a range of facts relevant to climate change, but in the social sciences, unless one believes our purpose is to produce more social scientists or informed citizens who understand what is happening (a purpose I reject, at least in this simplistic form), the critical pedagogue must inspire imaginative reflection and pathways for engaged action beyond the classroom. Facts can only take us so far, and that can be quite far sometimes when it comes to climate change. Students are still shocked by the gravity of the problem and the global inequalities that climate change is a manifestation of and further reproduces and reiterates.

And if you're thinking, *this is all pretty overtly politically motivated*, then you're damn right it is. As if allowing students to believe that if they just recycled a bit harder or ate a bit more tofu the world would be fine wasn't a grossly political pedagogical decision itself? The classroom is always already a political space, the position I'm defending here is one of *alter*politicization. Whatever conclusions reached, however contingent and open-ended they can and probably should be, must be the students' own. What is being encouraged here is not an attempt at clever manipulation, getting students to come to a conclusion that the pedagogue desires while the student believes it to be their own; this is not pedagogy-as-*Inception*. Presenting students with the opportunity to learn about climate change realities and to encounter imagined climate-changed futures so they take a specific position on climate change in the present and future is not the goal here either.

The supreme value of using these (and likely countless other films and novels) cultural objects in global politics courses is that they can give students opportunities within the classroom to think imaginatively how we might deal with climate-changed global politics, what might those alternatives be, and how can they—inside and outside the classroom collaborating and organizing with others—eschew cynicism and contribute to the development of alternative climate-changed politics that are more democratic, more egalitarian, and are less structurally-violent than our past, present, and extrapolated future would otherwise be. In this sense, the goal of a pedagogy for a climate-

changed politics is itself merely a starting point. The future of our human and non-human lives on the planet—and the ecological and social health of our overlapping and interpenetrating ecosystems and biomes—is contingent on the quality of the answers our students come up with. Now that is a truly immeasurable student learning outcome, but it is hard to imagine one more important to pursue.

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