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A Sociology of Failure: Migration and Narrative Method in US Climate Fiction

As experts and speculative authors alike attest, the future is migratory. Globalization has turned mobility into an essential component for survival, whether for precarious workers in the so-called gig economy or seasonal laborers moving across international borders. Against this backdrop, climate change accelerates displacement on a planetary scale. Indeed, international agencies have warned since at least 1990 that large-scale “human migration” may be “the single greatest impact of climate change.”¹ So what new social upheavals and political reconfigurations might follow from this unimaginable displacement? Speculative climate fiction (or “cli-fi”) in the United States provides glimpses into how this social unrest might unfold by drawing from past and present precedents. For example, Clare Vaye Watkins’s Gold Fame Citrus (2015) features a permanent drought that has destroyed the entire ecosystem of California and left its population desperate refugees. In addition to describing ecological devastation, the text spends considerable time on the specific population of people displaced (and, in effect, created) by the drought: the “Mojav,” a term intended to recall the Dust Bowl-era “Okie” farmers from the time of the Great Depression.² But if the Mojav is indicative of the historical parallels that inform cli-fi like Watkins’s novel, it also raises questions about how the genre imagines the future and the people in it. When considering the consequences of climate-induced migration, a phenomenon that is currently unfolding at a dramatic scale in the Global South, the text recalls a precedent grounded in the domestic context of the United States.

Alongside Watkins, cases of this narrative tactic are evident in cli-fi novels that make climate-induced migration an extended topic of concern: Paolo Bacigalupi’s The Water Knife (2015)³ and Kim Stanley Robinson’s New York 2140 (2017).⁴ Taken together, these sources represent something of the generational spectrum of popular cli-fi published in the United States. Gold Fame Citrus is Watkins’s first novel, which garnered critical praise in outlets such as NPR and
Vogue. Bacigalupi’s body of work has become synonymous with cli-fi itself, owing to the critical success from his novels *The Windup Girl* (2009) and *Ship Breaker* (2010). Finally, Robinson is among the most preeminent speculative authors in the United States today and has won praise for his explicit consideration of climate change across his recent work.⁵ Although these three texts constitute a small segment of all cli-fi, they together reflect a prevailing trend in popular examples of the genre: rather than enlarge their imaginative scope geographically and demographically, they narrow it. While cli-fi has of late been the subject of considerable popular and critical attention, this imaginative reduction has been undertheorized as it relates to the subject of climate-induced migration.

Indeed, many accounts stress instead the power of speculative fiction—an umbrella term encompassing cli-fi as well as related imaginative genres⁶—to produce more radical imaginaries around migration by representing and forecasting diverse populations into the future. The challenge for speculative authors, Aimee Bahng claims in *Migrant Futures*, is to push back against the linear narrative of capitalist “normativity” to affirm the future as a “multiply occupied space”—namely, by decentering the geopolitical imaginary of the United States and focusing instead on diasporic movements and far-flung geographical locales.⁷ Along similar lines, Shelley Streeby points to works by Indigenous authors and authors of color as cases where speculative writing can “help us think critically about the present and connect climate change to social movements.”⁸ In these critical accounts, cli-fi is most effective when it draws from the marginalized histories and traditions in order to imagine more diverse futures. Moreover, these sources affirm cli-fi’s capacity to staunchly reject the social forms inherited from settler colonialism and capitalism.⁹ Such a project is undoubtedly critical at a time of political recalcitrance on the one hand and a growing transnational climate activism on the other.
At the same time, to approach the genre only in terms of its success at representation overlooks the large extent to which many narratives in this area—as I explain at length below—actually fail to represent the diverse peoples already displaced by climate change. Recent criticism has set the groundwork for this intervention. Stephanie LeMenager notes the lingering ethnocentrism in climate change narratives by authors from “Europe, white America, Britain, and Scandinavia,”¹⁰ and Matthew Schneider-Mayerson decries an abiding focus on “white, wealthy, educated Americans” in the content of prominent cli-fi texts.¹¹ Such work casts into relief the Dust Bowl typology embedded in Watkins’s novel, which hinges on a domestic parallel for future climate migrancy. This foreshortening of the demographic scale of climate migration is evident in both the form and the content of the novel. Luz and her partner, Ray, are initially content to live in the ruins of Los Angeles in part because it was “more and more impossible to conceive of a time” when things had been better.¹² They are soon prompted to dream bigger when they rescue a child from the wastes and attempt to raise her as their own. The family immediately falls apart, however, when they fail to escape California and Ray goes missing. By the novel’s conclusion, Luz decides to leave the child behind in an act marking the final dissolution of Luz’s dreams for a more secure life. Returning to the terms above, Luz tries and fails to imagine herself as part of a larger community, whether it be in the case of her makeshift family or her fellow Mojav refugees.

But how might taking stock of such imaginative failures actually do something to improve the way cli-fi readers understand a pressing issue like climate migration? To provide an answer, this paper draws from scholarship at the intersection of sociology and literature in order to better account for the in-text failures evident in Watkins as well as Bacigalupi and Robinson. To be sure, the social imaginary is familiar terrain to literary critics, one developed on work from social scientists such as Benedict Anderson and Jürgen Habermas. The references to the sociological in this essay are an attempt to expand the critical capacity of the term to address social issues related
to climate change by turning to questions of methodology within literature. To this end, I draw from C. Wright Mills’s foundational work in *The Sociological Imagination* to offer an affirmative account of how failure operates in both the form and content of cli-fi narratives such as Watkins’s. This “sociology of failure” comes into clearer view when reading the novel’s depiction of the Mojavs alongside individual instances of failure dramatized within the narrative itself. This dynamic is also evident in Bacigalupi’s *The Water Knife*, which similarly takes place in the US West and involves a cast of characters struggling to adapt to the new society that climate change has wrought. Here, individual US states militarize their borders to keep out a “flood” of desperate domestic refugees, who in turn hire “professional coyotes” to make dangerous border crossings. In both novels, matters of plot and character development cast into relief the novels’ presentation of familiar geography and historical precedents.

Robinson explains how these sociohistorical features shape his own cli-fi novel, *New York 2140*. Specifically, the narrative explains its reliance on the “ease of representation” in order to make its tableau of environmental crisis and population displacement palatable to its readers. According to this reasoning, audiences are more likely to respond to stories that cater, at least in part, to their preexisting worldview. In Robinson’s case, all population displacement and extreme weather events take place within the bounds of New York City, a space that is hyperfamiliar to his presumed US readership and, hence, more likely to generate concern among these readers than would a story about Beijing “buried in forty feet of loess dust.” Robinson shrinks the scale of climate migration as well as climate change more generally in order to address directly the underlying, limited imaginary around these issues. Ease of representation assists in reevaluating the structure of a novel like *Gold Fame Citrus*, wherein imaginative failures extend from text and audience: Luz’s inability to imagine herself as part of a larger community of precarious migrants provides a point of reflection where readers may see their own imaginative failings. In short, these
texts demonstrate how the failure to translate concern into action is a problem within the pages of cli-fi, as well as one that genre considers in relation to its presumed readership.¹⁷

Referring to these insights as sociological affirms a long tradition that recognizes the speculative genre’s underlying sociological imagination. This framing of speculative fiction is the subject of work in both literary criticism and, as explained below, sociology itself. This essay draws from this cross-disciplinary legacy and applies it to a recurring concern in cli-fi and related criticism concerning the difficulty in representing the seemingly unimaginative scale of anthropogenic climate change. While several sources have noted this representational problem, including among others Rob Nixon and Amitav Ghosh, I return to the sociological thinking in speculative fiction in order to provide a new account of how cli-fi might, via its sociology of imaginative failure, encourage refreshed imageries around real and ongoing issues like population displacement. As Mills explains, structural problems such as unemployment or immigration are prone to imaginative death inasmuch as they integrate into the minutiae of daily life and thereby escape scrutiny. Such shortfalls are all the more consequential in the present context. As Matthew Paterson puts it, climate change provokes personal unease that slides into “indifference precisely because the traps of daily life prevent us from seeing” what Mills terms the “larger historical scene” that enables better involvement in public issues.¹⁸ In the cli-fi sources I consider in this essay, imaginative failure bridges form and content as well as the personal and the historical: characters fail to adapt to the migratory present in the narrative, which underscores the limits of the existing typologies of migration in the popular imagination. The goal of sociology, Mills maintains, is to lay bare how personal problems link to public issues with the intent of leveraging the former to transform the latter. Posing imaginative failure as a problem with both personal and public consequences, the novels dramatize the process by which the here and now shapes how we perceive the far and away.
Recognizing the sociological imagination in cli-fi ultimately supplements critical accounts of speculative fiction’s capacity to generate new social imaginaries. On this subject, Fredric Jameson’s criticism has been especially influential. For Jameson, the “deepest vocation” of speculative fiction “is over and over again to demonstrate and to dramatize our incapacity to imagine the future, to body forth, through apparently full representations which prove on closer inspection to be structurally and constitutively impoverished, the atrophy in our time” of utopian thought. When speculative fiction attempts to go forth into the unknown, in other words, it finds itself back in the “all-too-familiar,” and instead mediates “our own absolute limits” to think about the future. While Jameson himself has returned to the radical potential to utopian fiction in the years since “Progress versus Utopia,” the affirmative aspects of imaginative failure have—perhaps owing to his account—received scant attention in cli-fi criticism. In contrast, imaginative shortcomings are front and center of the works this paper considers: they explicitly meditate on imaginative failure and depict characters whose imaginations fall short of their reality. Rather than seeing the imaginative failures in much of cli-fi as evidence only of ideological entrapment, as Jameson might argue, we can take them as evidence of a narrative strategy to encourage readers to see imaginative failure itself as a hindrance to both personal as well as collective action in response to population displacement. It is clear, after all, that the public imagination in the Global North around an issue like climate migration already lags behind the reality. In the face of this disparity, each of the novels invites readers to think about those on the periphery of the US-centric imaginary by first passing through its center.

Sociological Approaches to Literature

While many may take it for granted that cli-fi can speak to or otherwise affect the way readers imagine the world, there is a relative lack of scholarship on the subject among
literary critics interested in sociology and literary studies. Fortunately, recent work has begun to address this gap. In particular, Matthew Schneider-Mayerson’s qualitative survey of cli-fi readers provides crucial insight into the genre’s capacity not only to inform but to motivate readers. He explains that “low-level” or proximate presentations of climate change in fiction—settings or characters that are more temporally immediate, spatially near, or socially familiar—“have been found to lead to higher level of concern and stronger intentions to engage in behaviors to mitigate climate change.” At the same time, cli-fi readers in the survey associate their readings with intensely negative feelings that may actually hinder their belief that anything can be done to avoid global catastrophe. In short, these findings indicate that while cli-fi encourages thinking about the personal consequences of climate change, its efficacy as a call to action hinges on readers’ capacity to connect their personal concerns to political outlets or solidarity-building networks. “If one of climate fiction’s goals is to contribute to more progressive climate policies and politics,” Schneider-Mayerson concludes, “it may be only as successful as the dominant cultural messages about meaningful environmental activities that are in circulation.” The fundamental asymmetry between individual concern and social action further reiterates the need to clarify the cultural motifs that circulate in these texts and the role they play in transmuting climate migration, a subject with global relevance, into one that appears psychologically proximate.

More work remains to supplement the insights of reader surveys and similar research in order to more fully delineate the methods by which cli-fi, a rapidly growing literary field, might assist in translating matters of personal concern into public ones. To do so requires not only the insights of literary criticism, but also those of sociology. Indeed, sociologists themselves have long recognized the speculative genre’s suitability for posing sociological concepts—relating to, for instance, labor, the state, and governance—in their “theoretically generative, pure form.” In their introduction to “Social Science Fiction,” social scientists Neil Gerlach and Sheryl N. Hamilton
argue that the genre should be understood in terms not only of “social representations or social
criticisms,” but how it responds to and shapes readers’ views of the world. Given this
preoccupation with social formations, speculative fiction should be seen as nothing less than a
“methodology for grasping the social.” Such appraisal for speculative fiction’s capacity for
engaging with social thought has recently extended to cli-fi as well. Political scientist Manjana
Milkoreit, for example, makes cli-fi narratives the object of extensive study and stresses their
potential for “trigging transformational change” in the collective imagination. If social scientists
have long asserted the sociological methods within speculative fiction, it is because these narratives
are speaking a language that social scientists are attuned to hearing.

For their part, literary critics have been less attentive to how speculative fiction embeds or
performs its own sociological methods. Instead, scholars such as Stephen Best, Sharon Marcus, and
Heather Love have advanced sociological ways of reading literature by drawing on the work of
sociologists such as Erving Goffman and Bruno Latour. According to Love, the “encounter between
literary studies and sociology” offers up “documentation and description” as key methods for
rethinking ethical models for understanding the world. Reading like a sociologist means paying
careful attention to what a narrative says instead of what is left unsaid or left only between the lines.
But as this last point also indicates, this version of sociology and literature primarily relates to the
work of the critic in assessing narratives. In contrast, David Alworth’s Site Reading is a prominent
example of a literary monograph calling for greater attention to the myriad ways literary sources
enact or perform their own sociological work. Drawing on scholarship associated with Actor-
Network Theory, Alworth argues that connecting literary study to sociology opens up new insights
into how literature theorizes the social. The argument in Site Reading thus seeks not only to move
beyond the “paradigm of critique,” as Love and like-minded scholars have advocated, but to
“apprehend the sociology in literature: the way that literary texts assemble an impression of a social
form.” As “an acute instrument of sociological thought,” the novel gives shape to the experience of social life via its assemblage of formal qualities such as narrative voice, characters, and most importantly for Alworth’s study, setting.

If Alworth’s sociology and literature take novelists as theorists of society per se, my account understands cli-fi narratives as sociological to the extent they take a proactive role in engaging with the public imagination around climate change and its specific societal consequences. This essentially pragmatic application of sociology in literature thus differs from Alworth’s cases, which, as Myka Tucker-Abramson points out, tend to overlook the uneven power dynamics that inform literary narratives. In contrast, the sociology of failure in cli-fi texts acknowledges, either directly or indirectly, the social sedimentation and power dynamics that shape the popular perception of migrant life in the domestic context of the United States. The specific construction of migrant people in Bacigalupi’s The Water Knife showcases this process at work. The narrative highlights the social fallout from climate change on both individual and large-scale levels. The extensive production of a massive population of refugees within the United States as a result of punishing drought conditions is a key product of this imagined context. But to make this social picture cohere, Bacigalupi frequently alludes to what exists outside the plot—to the readers’ own sense of migrant life and the underlying assumptions and race and geopolitics that inform it. Bacigalupi has described his intention to “charge up” images familiar to readers in the United States in order to approach politically fraught and complex subjects such as climate change and social policy. Thus, the long history of water scarcity in the US Southwest—as explored in Marc Reisner’s 1986 book Cadillac Desert, a frequent point of reference in The Water Knife—prefigures future anthropogenic climate change as a whole. Along similar lines, the novel’s setting in and around the US-Mexico border invokes the most predominant migrant archetypes in the United States—the northern-bound migrant laborer. Such allusions are critical, because they reflect the novel’s overarching interest in
inspiring a particular readership to scrutinize their own imaginaries around the issue of climate change in general and climate-induced migration in particular.

The novel explores various social groups affected by the drought-induced migrants by bringing typifying characters into close contact. In the novel, Texas has turned into a failed state and its population into stateless refugees. Countless other communities in the Southwest are on the brink of a similar collapse. Amid this backdrop, Angel—the novel’s titular water knife—uses any means necessary to steer access rights from vulnerable communities to his employer, a powerful water baron. Angel soon meets Lucy, a reporter whose journalistic beat consists of covering the water crisis and its impact on the community in Phoenix, Arizona. The third major character in the novel, Maria represents on an individual level the swelling population of climate migrants depicted in the story. Having come of age in the time of permanent drought, she is less equipped than either Angel or Lucy to recollect the descent into climate dystopia. Instead, she is committed to doing whatever she can to remove herself from her precarious social position. The novel elsewhere explores the various groups and agents that populate the uprooted Southwest. For example, corporations stage PR campaigns distributing water to desperate American refugees like the “Merry Perrys,” a migrant train consisting of Evangelical Texans, while elsewhere the text notes groups of “gaunt refugees of Arizona, Texas, and Mexico.”38 In this case, Bacigalupi is less interested in decentering the US geopolitical imaginary than in making it the basis for addressing his readers. The scenes and stagings are familiar, but the players are wrong; the narrative in turn invites us to consider what has led to the US decline.

In The Water Knife, both the people and the government of the United States have suffered a dramatic reversal in their fortunes. Militarized state borders, along with Texas’s secession from the union, have turned the Southwest into a warzone. The text ultimately presents a scenario in which US citizens are refugees in their own country—an experiential node that hinges on the sustained
comparison between the subjects in the narrative and those in reality who make undocumented crossings across the southern border. Bacigalupi implicitly refers to these latter migrants, familiar as they presumably are to his US readership, to give shape to the future climate migrants he depicts. For example, “professional coyotes” appear in the novel facilitating the movement of people across the border. But in these cases, they are moving not Latin American migrant workers but US refugees who, as a result of the drought, have been rendered homeless and seek a better life north of the border—in Canada.39

The comparison between the migratory United States of the future and what is implied to be the migratory Mexico of the past is sustained throughout. Both inside and outside the narrative frame, Mexico popularly connotes precisely the scenario that has, by novel’s opening pages, enveloped much of the United States: warring gang factions, mass murders, and a federal government largely helpless to intervene. Born in Mexico and now working in the United States, Angel helps to fill in the timeline linking the narrative’s events to something like our present. At one point, Angel considers the “raining bodies” that mark Arizona’s imminent collapse: “It reminded him of how it had been down in Mexico, before the Cartel States took control completely.”40 The collapse of state institutions in the face of black-market cartels has an origin of sorts in Mexico, Bacigalupi suggests, but will move beyond regional borders. In the novel’s presentation of migrant archetypes, then, Mexico embodies the type of systemic collapse and widespread displacement that might characterize the migratory future within the domestic United States.41

Foregrounding archetypes and demographic ordering, Bacigalupi’s representation of US migrant society unfolds according to a sociological framing. His characters operate in a world that has irreparably transformed, and as such they must recognize how they fit among the demographic types that reside within this new normal.42 In this respect, The Water Knife extends the sociological
tradition long associated with speculative writing. To be sure, Bacigalupi’s fiction draws across
generic conventions. His work prior to *The Water Knife* has been described as “biopunk” or “agri-
punk” owing to its focus on the interaction between the genetic engineering of foods, big
agricultural corporations, and the environment.\(^43\) *The Water Knife* also draws from the conventions
of noir in its presentation of shadowy business interests and organized crime. But it is the
sociological aspect to speculative writing that ties these disparate literary conventions together. In
his account of popular genre and racial forms, Mark Jerng notes that sociological ordering is a key
characteristic of speculative fiction in general. “Instead of funneling the story through the subject’s
development and psychology,” he explains, “science fiction orients readers to the material ways in
which the world is organized, how situations and landscapes are composed, and how objects are
arranged.”\(^44\) In the case of cli-fi, such sociological ordering assumes an added dimension of
meaning: climate change amplifies preexisting social dynamics, such as precarious labor in the
context of neoliberalism, while disrupting others. In Bacigalupi, the relative ease with which US
and Mexican citizens become refugees together—whereas previously, the book implies, they were
apart—should prompt those in the United States to reevaluate their sense of who migrants and
where they reside.

While clearly limited in scale, the migrant forms Bacigalupi draws upon may also do more
than reinforce stereotypes. According to Mills, the goal of sociological methods is to make one
aware of how the personal is transmuted into matters of political and public concern. He offers the
example of unemployment to illustrate this point: when one person is unemployed, people tend to
see this in terms of “personal trouble,” and therefore to ask questions that pertain to this intimate
scale: is this person upright and working hard enough? In contrast, when tens of millions are out of
work, people see this as a “public issue”; the questions they tend to ask focus on the social and
institutional—what laws need to be passed?\(^45\) The fact that we typically see the latter as a structural
problem and the former as a personal one—even though they may be both expressions of the same source, such as an economic recession—is proof enough that the link between experiential and social frames of reference needs to be under constant scrutiny.

*The Water Knife* makes similar links in its presentation of climate migration as an issue that is at once deeply familiar and unsettling. In Bacigalupi, familiar migrant typologies exist, but the racial and regional composition of these forms has been upended. Simply put, the novel asks its readers in the Global North to imagine themselves in the position they have long associated with the Global South. For Bacigalupi, one need not necessarily imagine the plight of climate refugees in Southeast Asia—or even in Southeast Florida. Rather, he asks readers to sympathize with the refugee or migrant *as such*, which informs the novel’s focus on the US-Mexico borderland as the space where migrancy, in effect, lives. *The Water Knife*’s social imaginary does not attempt to see displaced people the world over; its gambit instead is to task readers with sympathizing with the migrants they already know—or can at least visualize relatively easily.46 This specific typology is not representative of climate migration as it appears today but is rather an experiential point of reference—based on reader’s assumed familiarity with the borderland—that the text draws upon and directs to more sympathetic understandings of climate-based migrancy. To call the novel an example of a sociology of failure is not to say that it is unsuccessful in this latter task, but to note its own tacit acknowledgment of the limitations, in terms of geographic scale and demographic diversity, of how it attends to the global dimensions of climate migration. In doing so it, *The Water Knife* connects with the problem of representation at the heart of cli-fi texts at the center of the pages that follow.

<AHD>Climate Fiction’s Sociology of Failure
Failure to imagine the real ecological and humanitarian effects of climate change in particular is a recurring concern for both activists and fiction writers. As Nixon explains in *Slow Violence*, readers in the Global North are sheltered from the worst consequences of the global environmental crisis. As a result, there is an imaginative failure when it comes to thinking through the consequences of climate change, whose effects unfold slowly over time and more concentrated in the Global South. Nixon therefore argues that environmentalist writers must enable the public to imagine the effects of climate change in a context where such effects are forgotten, obscured, or simply ignored entirely. In such a situation, to “intervene representationally entails devising iconic symbols that embody amorphous calamities as well as narrative forms that infuse those symbols with dramatic urgency.”\(^{47}\) In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh makes the case throughout that writers of so-called realist fiction in particular have failed to do the work alluded to by Nixon. Moreover, Ghosh lays bare how these failures reverberate from the aesthetic to the social: “if certain literary forms are unable to negotiate these torrents, then they will have failed—and their failures will have to be counted as an aspect of the broader imaginative and cultural failure that lies at the heart of the climate crisis.”\(^{48}\) Ghosh forcefully argues that any comprehensive social action to combat climate change or address concomitant social unrest must be produced via the production of more imaginative cultural forms, because “the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination.”\(^{49}\) For Ghosh and Nixon alike, literature can—and must—spur the collective imagination to better apprehend the scale of anthropogenic climate change and its societal consequences, which have yet been unimaginable.

At the same time, Ghosh goes on to dismiss speculative fiction’s suitability to fulfill this work. For him, even cli-fi is unsuitable because it consists of “disaster stories set in the future” and thus locates climate change in another “time” or “dimension” separate from the disaster-laden present.\(^{50}\) Tom Moylan offers a succinct rejoinder to Ghosh when he explains that the future
settings in speculative writing should be understood less as an escape from reality than “an empowering escape to a very different way of thinking about, and possibly of being in, the world.”

Moreover, Ghosh’s claim also overlooks how much of speculative climate fiction is explicitly concerned with precisely the problem he diagnoses in realist novels—namely, the limits to the imagination in the face of climate change. Indeed, both individual and institutional failure is everywhere in recent cli-fi: the dystopian setting so common in these cases is the result of failed states and failed policies that either were ineffective at curbing climate change or accelerated it.

Alongside drought, mismanagement of natural water resources produces desperate refugees in *Gold Fame Citrus* and *The Water Knife*. Elsewhere, future dystopias—such as one finds in prominent and influential environmental novels such as Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003)—are built on the failure of political systems today to contain not only carbon emissions but also growing problems associated with unfettered capitalism more generally.

But while the point may be taken easily enough that cli-fi dystopias are built upon political and social failures, even relatively utopian cli-fi narratives evince a keen sense of failure in other ways. For example, Robinson’s *New York 2140* has garnered considerable critical attention owing to its presentation of the “practical problems of economics and politics” in relation to climate change. Set in the twenty-second century, the novel depicts New York City half-submerged in water after decades of dramatic reductions in the polar ice cap. But in the years since the flood, the city’s residents have innovated new ways of subsisting, squatting, and thriving within the city. In this setting, Robinson is less interested in futuristic technology than in the old-fashioned struggle between precarious urban communities and the finance world, which looks to push these people out in the name of gentrification. On one side, there are “the dispossessed,” who turned the drowned portions of the city into a space teeming with “cooperatives, neighborhood associations, [and]
communes.” On the other, there are the capitalists, whose goal is to “see what those crazy people did” within these common spaces and, “if it was good, buy it.” In response to this familiar struggle, Robinson’s novel offers up a relatively pragmatic platform of policy proposals, from a heavy tax on absent landlords to regulations on capital flight, that are actually enacted in the narrative after several characters organize a successful large-scale boycott of debt payments to the big banks.

At first glance, Robinson’s novel appears less concerned with failure than with success. But the novel is at pains to make clear that this is not quite the case. A character known as “citizen” addresses the reader directly throughout the novel and explains Robinson’s narrative strategy explicitly. New York is a useful setting for the novel because, the citizen says, it is “interesting as such, as a type, as well as for its peculiarities as an archipelago in an estuary debouching into a bight, featuring a lot of very tall buildings.” In other words, this imagined space is well-equipped for getting readers to think about climate change because it is eminently familiar as a “type,” one whose cultural connotations in the United States hinge on its imagined locus at “the center of the world, the capital of blah blah.” Even in the case of New York 2140, which imagines successful moments of solidarity among the dispossessed, the sociology of failure is evident: the narrative explicitly acknowledges its—or rather, its presumed readers’—modest capacity to see things beyond a limited perspective. Hence, the novel largely eschews the global populations of displaced people and sticks to familiar regional locales and character types. The rationale behind this narrative choice, according to the citizen, is simple: “Ease of representation: what strikes us most strongly seems more widespread than it really is.” Simply put, Robinson assumes that his readers (and people in general) will rely on the familiar when confronted with the unknown. Referring to representational bias—a concept developed at length in disciplines such as psychology and
economics—as a narrative strategy actually intended to produce readerly concern, Robinson enunciates what is largely latent in other cli-fi narratives considered here.

While Robinson’s novel demonstrates how failure operates in relation to the narrative imagination in general, Bacigalupi and Watkins exemplify it at play in relation to climate-induced migration. Indeed, the framing to Bacigalupi’s presentation of migrancy becomes clearer when read next to *Gold Fame Citrus*. As in *The Water Knife*, Watkins’s novel draws from iconic migrant typologies associated with the US Southwest region in order to extrapolate the near-future consequences of climate change. In *Gold Fame Citrus*, such parallels are at the forefront of its discussion of climate refugees. The novel largely focuses on Luz and Ray, a couple residing in the ruins of a once-affluent neighborhood in Los Angeles. While much of the state’s population has evacuated to families that will house them in other parts of the country, Luz and Ray remain to squat and scavenge among the wreckage. Like Bacigalupi, Watkins is careful to stress the thorough connection between the personal and the public in her narrative. From the very beginning of the novel, Luz literally embodies this connection: shortly after her birth, she was ceremoniously adopted by the Bureau of Conservation to be the face, as “Baby Dunn,” of the ongoing drought crisis in California. As she grew up, publicity campaigns used Baby Dunn’s personal milestones to mark the drought’s growing effects. Newspaper headlines kept pace with each event:

<EXT>

GOVERNOR SIGNS HSB 4579;
EVERY SWIMMING POOL TO BE DRAINED BEFORE BABY DUNN IS OLD ENOUGH TO TAKE SWIMMING LESSONS.
BABY DUNN STARTS KINDERGARTEN TODAY WITHOUT GREEN FIELDS TO PLAY IN.\(^\text{60}\)
Luz’s time in the spotlight largely informs her decision to stay in precarious anonymity with Ray among the abandoned California landscape. But their ambitions change early in the narrative after they encounter a toddler, whom they name Ig, and rashly rescue her from a squatter group that was dangerously neglecting her. With Ig in tow, they decide to strike out east in the determination to provide a better future for their makeshift family. The prospects of this journey are dim from the beginning, however: the extended drought has turned much of the Southwest into a hostile landscape. Their escape from California fails almost immediately in the face of this inimical ecosystem. Much of the novel in turn takes place in the Amargosa Dune Sea, a shifting desert that sprawls over almost the entire Southwest.

The simple familiarity of this story arc, in which a couple undertakes a dangerous journey to secure a better future for their child, underscores a point the novel makes about the cyclical nature of migration in and out of the region. Luz and Ray undertake the reverse course of a trek so recognizable in the US context: they are fleeing the same state that received previous generations that similarly left home in search of relative security. Displaced and on the road, Ray and Luz become one among the sprawling population of Mojav migrants. These refugees are seen as a pressing threat to the small towns and bordering states through which they pass. The narrative recalls the extent of the animosity:

The word stung, here and where it hung on the signage of factories in Houston and Des Moines, hand-painted on the gates of apartment complexes in Knoxville and Beaumont, in
crooked plastic letters on the marquees of Indianapolis elementary schools: MOJAVS NOT WELCOME. NO WORK FOR MOJAVS. MOJAVS KEEP OUT.61

The stark repression of this Mojav population foregrounds the geographic and historical associations that are tied to the specific history of the Southwest. Most immediately, the name itself gestures to the Mojave Desert, the region whose desiccated landscape now displaces the population that once resided there. More importantly, the novel’s depiction of the Mojavs, and the contempt hurled at them, brings to mind the marginalization of Dust Bowl migrants, the so-called Okies as immortalized in sources such as John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* and James Agee and Walker Evans’s *Now Let Us Praise Famous Men*.

Watkins throughout makes it exceedingly clear that the historical Okie migrant is the primary template for imagining the movements of—and widespread resistance to—this future population of water migrants. In the case of the Dust Bowl, severe drought conditions coupled with decades of topsoil depletion created the dust storms that displaced thousands of people. *Gold Fame Citrus* builds on this precedent in its depiction of the Amargosa Dune Sea, which engulfs everything in and around the Mojave Desert along the eastern border of California. The imaginative setting comes to life through a series of descriptions in the narratives that explicitly call to mind the most iconic symbols of the Dust Bowl era and the displaced Okie farmers. In one instance, the narrative recalls a “Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph,” which depicts a group of residents fleeing the encroaching dune.62 Watkins’s novel further emphasizes how this future image draws from the past. The displaced residents in the photograph “looked to the white whale glittering in the sun and saw their homes, shops, their football field entombed in sand. Preserved. Like those quaint towns they’d read about, long ago drowned by dams but reemerged, mud-logged and algaed and alien-
looking, as the reservoirs drained.” If the narrative frames the Mojav struggle around these historical precedents, the Mojav characters themselves in turn borrow from the same iconography associated with the Okies. For example, a campaign to humanize the Mojav community takes its cues from the same sources that more implicitly shape Watkins’s narrative. As an organizer for the campaign puts it, the subjects for their publicity photographs need “skin and sound. Heaven lighting. Squalor, but resolve. Some Dorothea Lange shit.”

While the scene above underscores the influence of the Dust Bowl precedent on the novel’s future migrants, Watkins also subjects this parallel to fresh scrutiny. The reference to Lange’s influential Depression-era photography as an object lesson in good PR already gestures to how Watkins’s novel characterizes the representational practices it is otherwise interested in curating: useful for anticipating future migration trends—and anti-migrant campaigns—these representations alone do nothing to break the cycle of displacement and repression embedded in the Southwest. The novel elsewhere makes this point apparent. After losing Ray during an attempt at crossing the Amargosa Dune Sea, Luz joins a shantytown colony that is led by a charismatic prophet figure. The leader of this quasi-utopian society, Levi encourages Luz to play the central role in his Lange-inspired media campaign—in effect, drawing on the public’s familiarity with her earlier “Baby Dunn” campaigns. As the potential face of the Mojavs, Luz “delivered her greatest role. She played long-suffering, she played pure. A mother.” The novel in short order links together the Mojavs, Baby Dunn, and Lange’s real-life documentary work. If Lange’s 1936 “Migrant Mother” photograph became the public face of the Okie population, Luz is to play the analogous role for the Mojav cause. Despite pressure from her peers, however, Luz is reluctant to turn herself and Ig into mere symbols for the cause. By the conclusion of the novel, Luz comes to realize the point that the narrative as a whole has hinted at from the beginning: that recognizing parallels between familiar migrant cases and present ones does not, on its own, prevent the cycle of displacement and
marginalizing violence from repeating itself. The novel in turn is left pondering what “Dorothea Lange shit” can do in the present context, when not one group alone but innumerable ones face the precarious conditions imposed by catastrophic climate change.

More critically for the novel and for Luz, this realization also leaves little room for radical change on either an individual or societal level. Luz eventually rejects playing the role, which sours her relationship with Levi and endangers her position within the community. When Ray eventually finds his way back to Luz, she must come to a decision: to flee with Ray or to stay and play the role assigned to her. Eventually, Luz decides to leave with Ray—but on the condition, which Levi imposes, that Ig stays behind in the community’s care. Luz agrees in an act that, at first glance, appears to place self-interest above all else. But, as Watkins stresses, Luz’s decision to leave behind her adopted child conforms within a larger template. In fact, Luz comes to realize that she is the latest among the “runners and flakes” who had moved West:

<EXT>
Fluffers, carpetbaggers, migrant pickers disappeared, entrepreneurs in never-were garages, all those servers. She was all of them, at last. San Simeon and San Quentin. Neverland Ranch and Alcatraz. She was Boyle Heights, Fruitvale, La Habra. Koreatown, Cambodia Town, Filipinotown, Japantown, Little Tokyo, Little Seoul, Little Manila, Little Saigon. . . . These were her people. Speculators and opportunists, carnival barkers and realtors, imagineers, cowards and dreamers and girls. Mojavs.66
</EXT>

The archetypes she gathers here collapses all manner of migrants—whether they be “migrant pickers” or “entrepreneurs”—into a single umbrella category. What unites them all, the narrative
declares, is their shared status as migrants. But this realization is anything but empowering for Luz, who commits suicide immediately following this scene. The recollection of migrant subjects and migrant communities in the preceding quotation at once proposes and dismisses any sense of solidarity among these disparate groups: Luz might identify with them, but this gesture falls well short of generating any positive affiliation or solidarity. Indeed, the various references to ethnic enclaves delimit the social stratification that has previously interrupted any form of collective identification among migrants in California. The implication throughout is that region’s allure—encapsulated by the novel’s titular reference to the gold, fame, and citrus associated with the region—has exerted a powerful influence on the collective imagination. The social imaginary around migration in this case might run deep, but these imaginative structures need to change if one is to recognize the present and future forms of migrant life as exacerbated by climate change.

Watkins’s representation of the Mojavs and the historical templates for them clarifies what Love offers as the “alternative ethics” that accompanies the sociological turn in literature scholarship. For Love, sociological description provides powerful accounts of unjust social practices and phenomena. The key point here, however, is not critique per se but rather critique that follows from description: fiction that operates in the this mode registers “the losses of history” by way of sustained accounting of what these losses involve. The distinction is between reading literature for what it says (or describes) and reading for what it does not, or cannot, say—the “hermeneutics of suspicion” against which Love’s essay is posed. Drawing from Goffman’s sociological work, Love argues that sociological description need not articulate an explicitly ethical framing in order to help readers understand (and scrutinize) the way the world is. Rather, she describes the sociological model she adapts from Goffman and Latour as one that refuses to divide up human behavior into “realms of authentic action and stereotyped or conventional behavior.” Instead, everything is performative: there is no authentic reality to which one can escape from the
world as it appears and social practices as they are performed. This conclusion echoes throughout Watkins’s novel. The previous reference to Lange’s Migrant Mother is one example of the way that the documentary aesthetic constitutes how we view the world while, at the same time, being a fabrication. The Dust Bowl parallel thus not only provides the speculative novel with verisimilitude, but also acknowledges the extent to which such powerful and flawed typologies order the way one understands the world in general—and, in this case, migrant groups.

Confronting Imaginative Failure

As Love’s reading of Goffman helpfully demonstrates, climate fiction need not appeal to the authentic in order to register its critical work. Instead, the sociological imaginary in Watkins and Bacigalupi contends with things as they are, or as they appear in the “mere behavior” of individuals or the prejudices of a social group. As I have been suggesting, the juxtaposition of old migration types with future social problems in cli-fi narratives like The Water Knife and Gold Fame Citrus is a key narrative tool for positioning the social imaginary around migration at the point of rupture: the tension between old frames of reference and new environmental and social norms relates something of the imaginative lack at the center of the climate change debate more generally. The absence of more authentic referents in these texts—why the Okie of the 1930s is the operative comparison rather than, for example, the displaced person after Hurricane Katrina in 2005—reiterates the point that what appears most psychologically proximate or culturally familiar is not always what is most widespread in reality.

As outlined here, the sociology of failure reiterates what critics have identified in prominent cli-fi as a lack of voices to articulate the experience of people already marginalized by climate change both in the Global South and within the Global North. To the extent they rely on outdated migrant parallels, these narratives do little to address this absence. At the same time, it is worth
considering how these texts describe and consider their own imaginative shortcomings in relation to climate migration in particular. After all, these texts spend considerable time establishing both the pervasiveness of historical parallels in contemporary thinking about climate migration while also stressing their limitations as the basis for generating solidarity today or in the future. If one way environmental literature produces concern is by encouraging “strong identification with a focal character or resonance with a major theme,” what to make of the imaginative failure, writ large and small, that is front and center in these novels? Addressing this question in particular, I have argued that cli-fi compels us to consider not just its imaginative expanses, but also its limitations.

Ultimately, Watkins and Bacigalupi present narratives that do more to warn of the dubious action that follows from compromised imaginaries than present new, transformed ones. The preceding scene from *Gold Fame Citrus* illustrates this dynamic clearly. Here, the novel gestures to the possibility that Luz might, to use Mills’s terminology, stop thinking about migrancy in terms of “personal trouble” and instead as a “public issue” that connects all manner of migrants. But although the novel frequently connects the personal to the public, it also makes it clear that this is merely a precondition for generating a new social imaginary around climate change and climate-induced migration. The hard work remains, Watkins implies, to see what thinking about climate migration as a public issue will generate in terms of meaningful action. Luz’s final realization in particular reflects the vexed representation of migration that this essay as a whole has been considering. Although Luz rejects becoming the Mojav version of Lange’s Migrant Mother, she ultimately accedes (if only momentarily) to an even larger self-identification as the migrant per se, a category that spans racial and ethnic difference. But this gesture also fails to produce a reparative social imaginary for the character. Instead, Luz struggles to accommodate the fundamental lesson in Mills’s sociological imagination: that insights into individual experiences become clearer once one recognizes the historical scene that intersects with the personal, or “by becoming aware of all
individuals in his circumstances.” The novel pushes Luz to identify with these past migrant groups in more ways than one; but rather than articulate what such an empathic connection might engender in terms of a new understanding of the migrant, the narrative instead marks the foreclosure of this possibility under present conditions.

Bacigalupi also dramatizes a conflict between characters struggling against traditional ways of seeing the world in an apocalyptic context. *The Water Knife* features a climactic standoff between several characters who each want to use the water rights—which will determine the distribution of scarce water resources for the whole Southwest—for dramatically different purposes. This conflict comes to a head when Lucy, the journalist, learns about the rights and works to direct them to the dangerously precarious city of Phoenix, which she reasons can use them to secure their own source of water and thrive. However, she is stopped before she can complete her plan by Maria, the young climate migrant. Given the ultimate power to decide whom to help, Maria incapacitates Lucy, and delivers the document back to Angel in exchange for safe passage to the relative security of Las Vegas, which has ensconced its wealthy inhabitants within luxurious biodomes. Maria in this instance dismisses Lucy’s altruism, reasoning that it does not fit the world as it now exists: “She thinks the world is supposed to be one way, but it’s not. It’s already changed. And she can’t see it, ’cause she only sees how it used to be. Before. When things were old.” If Lucy’s determination to use the water rights to help the vulnerable community in Arizona appears to be the right thing to do, then Maria’s response should confound this assumption. Bacigalupi’s text asks us to scrutinize familiar assumptions about security and insecurity, self-interest and the social good—indeed, between right and wrong—in the interest of breaking with the past. Rather than endorsing Maria’s ultimate decision, the novel underscores the need to adapt to the new realities that climate change in particular has and will impose on all of us. In other words, the
conclusion is less about the promotion of self-interest over the collective good and more about the inherent limitations to understanding society via outdated frames of reference.

In all of these preceding cases, individual and social change alike are held in check by what is essentially a lack of imagination. In making this connection, these sources open themselves up to a larger debate about how literature itself might produce a more radical imaginary in its readers.

The sociology of failure developed here identifies a common narrative tactic in cli-fi, which is to make the larger imaginative gaps regarding comprehensive and proactive responses to climate change and climate-induced migration the object of sustained scrutiny. In terms of content, this failure is evident enough in the various instances of characters who themselves are unable to adapt to their migratory lives. The individual cases within these cli-fi texts thus act in tandem with the narrative structures, which formally reproduce old types and figures from more familiar cases of migratory life that loom large in the American social imaginary. In short, these speculative works not only document the ongoing and predicted effects of climate change, but also account both explicitly and implicitly for the social imagination that filters and interprets these events. The connection of form to content, along with the individual to the social, emphasizes the deeply sociological thinking at play within these texts. Climate migration require characters to confront social conditions that alter with haste: formerly wealthy regions are driven to poverty, governmental institutions crumble, and vast swaths of the US population find themselves on the wrong side of state lines. In this context, characters struggle not only to survive but to understand their plight: how does one make sense of this scenario if all precedents fail to account for its scale? These sources all acknowledge, either indirectly or directly, the limits to the parallels they use to make these scenarios perceptible to their readership, whether it be in the case of Robinson’s ease of representation or in the failures dramatized within Watkins’s and Bacigalupi’s narratives. In this light, it is difficult to read the representational lack in these works as only accidental but rather as a
component of how these texts think about imaginative failure. Extending from within the text to the social context outside, cli-fi can attest to what many cannot—or will not—see today as much as it imagines the future.

<NOTES>

1 Oli Brown, “Migration and Climate Change,” in IOM Migration Research Series (Geneva: International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2008), pp. 1–60, at p. 11. Brown further cites studies that estimate anywhere between 25 million and 1 billion people will be displaced by climate change by 2050.


6 Aimee Bahng succinctly explains the rationale for using the term “speculative fiction” to refer to science fiction and adjacent genres. The label, she explains, “calls into question the genre-making practices of science fiction” by rejecting any distinction between “hard” and “soft” science fiction, or between the past and the future as areas for imaginative possibility-making. See Bahng, Migrant

7 Ibid., p. 17.


13 The creative potential that instances of failure afford has lately been the subject of study in the area of queer theory, which—following Jack Halberstam—stresses the subversive quality of failure in response to neoliberalism’s demand for productivity. See Halberstam, The Queer Art of Failure (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
14 Bacigalupi, *Water Knife* (above, no. 3), pp. 49, 47.


16 Ibid.

17 Schneider-Mayerson also touches upon this imaginative failure, remarking that if “globalization and digital technologies have allegedly shrunk the world, they have not appreciably expanded Americans’ knowledge of and interest in other places and cultures.” See Schneider-Mayerson, “Whose Odds?” (above, n. 11), p. 17.


20 Ibid.


Ibid., p. 479.

Ibid., p. 495.


Ibid., p. 168.


Ibid.

The notion that cli-fi is uniquely or especially equipped to affect the way readers interpret social structures informs research in both the social sciences and literary studies. See, for example,


39 Ibid., p. 47.

40 Ibid., p. 245.


42 Srinivas Aravamudan refers to this temporality as the “catachronism,” or “the inversion of anachronism,” and argues that it reflects the sense that the origin to our future climate apocalypse


46 The struggle to represent climate migrants in terms that humanize while also generating action extends from fiction to governance. Giovanni Bettini finds language in governmental and NGO papers that stresses an apocalyptic vision of climate migration that, in his analysis, potentially further marginalizes migrant groups. See Bettini, “Climate Barbarians at the Gate? A Critique of Apocalyptic Narratives on ‘Climate Refugees’,” *Geoforum* 45 (March 2013): 63–72, at p. 45.


49 Ibid., p. 9.

50 Ibid., p. 72.


54 Ibid., p. 145.

55 Ibid., p. 602.

56 Ibid., p. 495.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid., p. 496.

59 Perhaps the most foundational account of the representational bias Robinson alludes to here comes from Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, psychologists who published extensively on heuristics and biases. In particular, they argue that one tends to overrely on stereotypes when making decisions and evaluating probability. Thus, people typically believe fallaciously that the phenomena with which they are most familiar—that most easily fit into a preconceived typology—are also the most widely occurring or the most likely to occur in the future. See Tversky and Kahneman, “Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases,” Science 185:4157 (1972): 1124–1131, at p. 1124.

60 Watkins, Gold Fame Citrus (above, n. 2), p. 12.

61 Ibid., p. 23.

62 Ibid., p. 118.

63 Ibid., p. 119.

64 Ibid., p. 232.

65 Ibid., p. 168.


Ibid., p. 386.

Ibid., p. 381.

Ibid., p. 380.


Ibid., p. 5.