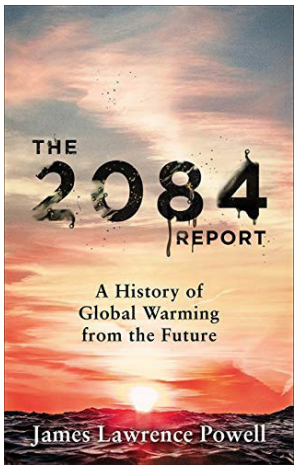
Review of *The 2084 Report*, by James Lawrence Powell

Ada Cheong

Powell, James Lawrence. *The 2084 Report: An Oral History of the Great Warming.* Simon and Schuster, 2020.



The 2084 Report is the only work of fiction written by James Lawrence Powell, an American geochemist who has written books on climate science, the Grand Canyon, the Colorado River and the extinction of dinosaurs. The novel is an authoritative chronicle of the effects of climate breakdown as experienced across the globe in an imagined near future. Composed of interviews collected and published in the year 2084 by an unnamed oral historian, it is organised thematically around specific, albeit overlapping, phenomena: droughts and fire, flooding, the rising of sea levels, melting glaciers and permafrost, resource struggles, fascism and xenophobia, death, and nonhuman extinctions.

Powell's book plays into a major trope within the cli-fi genre, one which features a future historian interpreting and documenting the errors, failures, and sometimes demise of contemporary life in the Capitalocene. *The 2084 Report* begins with a preface by a historian, dated Dec 31 2084 in Kentucky. He describes his methods to produce the book, "knowing that it will be read mostly by friends and family" (preface). Like works such as *The Age of Stupid*, *World War Z*, and *The Collapse of Western Civilization*, it conjures what Pieter Vermeulen describes as the "posthumous readability" (880) of climate breakdown and human extinction, evoking "a ravaged future in order to serve as a warning for its present readers" (869).

As is expected of works within this subgenre, Powell's book is elegiac in tone, as ecological beauty vanishes, and communities lose their lands and livelihoods in the near future. Displaying the vivid speculative prowess of fictional prose, it details the eventual demise of cities and communities in both the Global North and South, as their water resources disappear, from Bangladesh and the Netherlands to Peru and Phoenix. The book features the "ghostly skeleton of some monstrous, dissected sea creature" that the Great Barrier Reef has become (part 8), and the demise of tropical glaciers—a miraculously beautiful "contradicción frágil" (part 4). As ecosystems are torn asunder, so too are monuments of civilisation: China's Three Gorges Dam is destroyed when a "giant wall of water washed down the Yangtze, sweeping away everything before it" (part 2), and the Statue of Liberty meets a similar demise as "one giant wave toppled her" (part 2).

The novel thus offers a glimpse into what Greg Garrard calls disanthropy, "the world as it is

when we are not looking… at once alluring and frighteningly indifferent" (942). Such an aesthetic centres around the downplaying of human agency and exceptionalism in the face of seemingly cosmological and uncontrollable anthropogenic climate phenomena. Vermeulen likewise suggests that works within this subgenre are "sustained exercises in abandoning human life to a geological gaze that is rigorously uninterested in understanding human exceptionality" (880), allowing contemporary readers to "begin facing up to the increasingly inescapable fact of human species finitude" (872). To critics like Garrard and Vermeulen, then, trope performs an important cultural function, one which leans towards a stoic acceptance of climate breakdown rather than action and activism in averting such a future.

Yet, Powell's book suggests an alternate function that narratives and fiction have to play in the climate crisis. While such texts commonly employ a narrative temporality in which "the present is always also the object of a future memory" (Vermeulen 872), producing "an imagining of the future as if it were already past" (Vermeulen 872), *The 2084 Report* is slightly different in its temporal inflection. Rather than a book that mourns the future as foregone, it is very much present-oriented, focussed on human agency and the ability to avert a future-without-humanity.

The depth of knowledge that Powell possesses of climate science accurately brings to life the socio-political impacts that the impending ecological fallouts will create. It provides first-hand accounts of the creation and displacement of "25 million Bangladeshi climate refugees" (part 2), the "seemingly endless human chain (that) filled the roads" (part 4) when glacier meltwater dries up, the slow violence of water rations in Phoenix (part 1), and wars within the Arab nations over water (part 5). It is concerned with making real both the slow and dramatic consequences of climate breakdown, drawing strong causal links between climate phenomena and the subjective lives of different human beings. Despite its strong scientific focus (its range of interviewees invariably cite climate statistics), it grapples with both the slow, Nixonian violences of climate breakdown, and its large-scale catastrophes. *The 2084 Report* thus enables us to approach the material—and affective—reality of our near future.

Unlike the disanthropic works described by Vermuelen and Garrard, however, Powell's book takes this as the first step towards tackling the climate crisis. As Energy Humanists like Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer suggest, the climate crisis is not just a technological or scientific problem, but an imaginative and cultural one (Szeman and Boyer 3). Books such as Powell's novel allow readers to begin properly understanding the affective and cultural consequences of climate breakdown and thus to act to avert it.

Its final two chapters are, perhaps, the most obvious example of this urgent aspiration towards the possibility of steering the planet away from climate catastrophe. While the book largely maintains that climate breakdown within the story has become irreversible, past the "point of no return" (part 9), it also insists on the ability to imagine a different future. The narrator, speaking to two professors in energy production and politics, reiterates:

> you are saying that several countries, including Canada, France, and Sweden, had shown that an expansion of nuclear power production could have cut fossil-fuel emissions enough between 2020 and 2050 to keep the global temperature rise under 3.6 ° F [2 ° C] and to eliminate fossil-fuel use. More than two dozen countries, including the U.S., China, Russia, and India, had the necessary experience and controls. And yet it was not done. (Look to Sweden I)

The overarching question of the book, then, is not just "why, back in the first few decades of this century, before time had run out, people did not act to at least slow down global warming" (part 0)—but what are our last possible options in averting large-scale climate catastrophe?

In looking urgently towards the options we have at present, Powell's book is closer in tenor to Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*. Instead of a nihilistic reckoning with a world without us, it is occupied with the political and ecological cascade of actions and consequences that branch from our contemporary moment.

The book remains, ultimately, largely driven by facts, even as it colours in the subjective and affectual experiences of the immediate future. The interviewees presented are voices of authority (politicians/journalists) and scholars who are experts in energy politics, geology, engineering, anthropology and more—with the exception of an indigenous native of Brazil (part 1) and a native of the island of Tuvalu, off the coast of New Zealand (part 3). While the glaringly elitist selection of voices does make space for emotions, with characters feeling "terribly sad" (part 2) or remembering how their favourite beaches grew narrower (part 2), the book's seemingly limited affective scope is not simply a result of its privileging of science over culture as in the age-old disciplinary distinction.

Rather, it recounts the chaotic, messy fallout of climate breakdown through an incongruously neat aesthetic. Beyond the cataloguing of its interviews by theme and didactic questioning, the prose of the book is largely rational, easy and authoritative. It is at odds with the structure of feeling that has come to characterise the Capitalocene in the 21st-century, one which Fredric Jameson describes as a fundamental break, a "situation where discontinuity has become more fundamental than continuity" (318). The overwhelming, discombobulating nature of this simultaneously planetary and unevenly specific fate is unsatisfactorily conveyed by the oral historian's curated and complete recounting of the near future. The neat sorting of climate phenomena into themes and the narration of the violence wrought by climate breakdown captures the content, but not form, of the experiences to come.

Ultimately, *The 2084 Report* manages to turn "science faction" into a compliment, suggesting key ways in which narratives and fiction intervene in shaping conceptualisations of the climate crisis. While unable to convincingly pull it off through the quality of its prose, Powell's book points authoritatively towards the shape of the troubles facing us.

Works Cited

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Ada Cheong (she/her) is a PhD candidate based at the University of Exeter. She is fascinated by the alimentary anxieties surrounding the world-food-system, and the ways in which issues such as industrial meat, ultra-processed foods, GM technology etc. register culturally in sf works from the 1970s onwards. Her research more generally concerns the politics and culture of the Capitalocene, and critically engages with the fields of the Energy Humanities and world-ecological literary studies. She is also a communicator and writer for the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission.