

# Domesticating US Masculinity to Stop Climate Change:

## Kim Stanley Robinson's *Green Earth*

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**ABSTRACT** There is a close correlation between patriarchal masculinity and climate change, which fiction is only addressing sporadically, doing so more frequently within the genre of science fiction. In the trilogy *Science in the Capital* by noted sf author Kim Stanley Robinson, US progressive masculinity is pitted against the dramatic effects of climate change, with both author and the main male characters (Frank Vanderwal, Charlie Quibler and Phil Chase) revealing a full awareness that the damage has been caused by patriarchal interests. Originally encompassing the novels *Forty Signs of Rain* (2004), *Fifty Degrees Below* (2005), and *Sixty Days And Counting* (2007), the trilogy was revised and shortened to be re-issued as the novel *Green Earth* (2015), which is the focus of analysis in this article. The thesis argued is that, possibly following personal motivation rather than a specific gender ideology, Robinson ties the success of progressive masculinity in the fight against climate change to the successful domestication and domesticity of the three main male characters, above all of Vanderwal. In the process, however, Robinson overlooks the privileged position of his white male protagonists and the potential for leadership of non-white, progressive men (or women).

**Keywords:** masculinity; climate change; science fiction; domesticity; Kim Stanley Robinson; *Green Earth*

**RESUMEN** Existe una estrecha correlación entre la masculinidad patriarcal y el cambio climático, que la ficción solo aborda de forma esporádica, con más frecuencia dentro del género de la ciencia ficción. En la trilogía *Ciencia en la Capital* del reconocido autor de ciencia ficción Kim Stanley Robinson, la masculinidad progresista estadounidense se enfrenta a los efectos dramáticos del cambio climático, con tanto el autor como los protagonistas masculinos (Frank Vanderwal, Charlie Quibler y Phil Chase) revelando una plena conciencia de que el daño ha sido causado por intereses patriarcales. Originalmente compuesta por las novelas *Forty Signs of Rain* (2004, *Señales de lluvia*), *Fifty Degrees Below* (2005) y *Sixty Days and Counting* (2007), la trilogía fue revisada y acortada, siendo reeditada como la novela *Green Earth* (2015), que es el centro de interés en este artículo. La tesis argumenta que, posiblemente siguiendo una motivación personal más que una ideología de género específica, Robinson vincula el éxito de la masculinidad progresista en la lucha contra el cambio climático con la domesticación y la domesticidad exitosas de los tres personajes masculinos principales, sobre todo de Vanderwal. Sin embargo, en este proceso, Robinson pasa por alto la posición privilegiada de sus protagonistas masculinos blancos y el potencial liderazgo de hombres (o mujeres) no blancos progresistas.

Palabras clave: masculinidad; cambio climático; ciencia ficción; domesticidad; Kim Stanley Robinson; *Green Earth*

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## **1. PROGRESSIVE MASCULINITY AGAINST PATRIARCHAL CLIMATE CHANGE: KIM STANLEY ROBINSON'S UTOPIAN SCIENCE FICTION**

Few deny today that climate change is happening, in view of the overwhelming evidence provided by scientific data and the extreme meteorological events experienced in all corners of Earth. Climate change is clearly anthropogenic, yet this reality is still stubbornly denied by the patriarchal individuals, mostly men, intent on retaining power even at the cost of wrecking the planet. Ecofeminism, a concept introduced by French author Françoise d'Eaubonne in *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974), traces, precisely, a parallelism between the patriarchal abuse of women and of nature. This comparison has, nonetheless, greatly problematized the position of the anti-patriarchal, progressive men in the more recent ecofeminist theorization—started in the early 1990s with volumes such as Mies and Shiva's *Ecofeminism* (1993)—and, indeed, in their struggle against what I do not hesitate to call patriarchy-related climate change.

Even though the masculine defense of nature against the onslaught of predatory capitalism started more than two centuries ago, as Coupe demonstrates in *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* (2000), Cenamor and Brandt refer in their introduction to their edited volume *Ecomasculinities: Negotiating Male Gender Identity in U.S. Fiction* to Allister's collection *Eco-Man: New Perspectives on Masculinity and Nature* (2004) as a key contribution to what they describe as a new trend. "In the past few years," Cenamor and Brandt note, "more and more scholars (initially primarily male) have challenged the essentialist understanding of the relation between men and nature by demonstrating how men can indeed care for nature and develop a more egalitarian and less biophobic relationship with it" (2019, 8). Seemingly, the combination of Critical Studies of Men and Masculinities and ecocriticism is finally rebuilding and renewing the centuries-old masculine discourse on nature that 1980s capitalist liberalism eroded with its onslaught on any truly alternative masculinities, even though this discourse was already present in the work of Romantic writers like William Wordsworth (1770-1850), and in the philosophy of American Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and his disciple Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), without neglecting men's contributions to the birth of modern environmental activism in the 1970s.

One matter is the urgency of the climate change crisis so deeply engrained in the Anthropocene and quite another the current literary, artistic discourse on nature. A significant problem is that although catastrophic climate change has been happening for

decades, contemporary literary authors mostly ignore it as a proper, relevant topic for creative fiction. The few writers who have dealt with it—such as Amitav Ghosh in his novels *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Gun Island* (2019)—have done so with a certain apprehension that their work might be misjudged as mere ‘cli-fi’, the trite nickname for the subgenre of science fiction dealing with climate change. In his non-fiction volume *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Ghosh himself observes that although novelists are well aware of climate fiction, they only write about it “almost always outside of fiction” (2016, 8). This is why he warns that identifying the factors that make literary writers reluctant to deal with climate fiction is “a task of the utmost urgency” (9), for “the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (9).

The reaction from the ranks of sf has consisted of breaking down genre barriers with novels on the climate emergency set in an ultra-realistic (very) near future. This is the strategy followed by US author Kim Stanley Robinson (b. 1952),<sup>2</sup> currently one of the most respected science-fiction Anglophone writers, in his Science in the Capital trilogy, composed by *Forty Signs of Rain* (2004), *Fifty Degrees Below* (2005), and *Sixty Days And Counting* (2007). I focus here on the compressed omnibus edition, the novel *Green Earth* (2015), which Robinson published, as he explains in the introduction, to update the scientific background of his trilogy and to suppress information that had already become common knowledge ten years after the publication of the first novel.<sup>3</sup>

In that same introduction Robinson warns that “If you want to write a novel about our world now, you’d better write science fiction, or you will be doing some kind of inadvertent nostalgia piece; you will lack depth, miss the point, and remain confused” (2015, xii). The author is not keen on using ‘climate fiction’ as a separate genre label because “all near-future sf now has to include climate change” (in Canavan et al. 2018, 427) or risk sounding phony. In the same text (a symposium), Canavan observes that “the ongoing irruption of the climate crisis into a global society that remains radically, reprehensibly unready for it means that the future truly is already here” (420). Remarkably,

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<sup>2</sup> Robinson, whose career started in 1984, is known internationally for his multiple award-winning trilogy *Red Mars* (1992), *Green Mars* (1993), and *Blue Mars* (1996), completed by the short story collection *The Martians* (1999). His experimental speculative novel *The Ministry for the Future* (2020) also addresses climate change, even proposing a certain use of violence to stop the patriarchal abusers of Earth (see Martín 2025).

<sup>3</sup> Robinson eliminated about 300 pages but claims that “Nothing important was lost in this squishing;” besides, the trilogy is “thereby better revealed for what it was all along, which is a single novel” (2015, xxiii). He was inspired by Peter Matthiessen’s *Shadow Country* (2008), which combines *Killing Mr. Watson* (1990), *Lost Man’s River* (1997), and *Bone By Bone* (1999).

Canavan explains in another piece, Robinson responds to “consensus apocalypse” (2022, 180)—the notion replacing the expectation of an endless future progress typical of classic Golden Age sf—with a utopian approach based on the hope that “a better world still remains possible” (180) though it might not be feasible. Robinson himself clarifies that his utopianism is neither prescriptive nor programmatic, but “a vision of the way things *ought to be*” (2016, 8, added emphasis). This is why Markley calls him “hardly a typical utopianist” (2019, 5), an opinion that I endorse.

As Markley further explains, “Rather than polished utopian societies, interstellar swashbuckling, or tub-thumping triumphs over world-weary dystopianism,” Robinson presents “futures that experiment in the greening of science, economics, and politics” (2019, 5) with caution but also with determination. In his novels—and in other works by both sf and mainstream US authors such as Octavia Butler, Barbara Kingsolver, Paolo Bacigalupi or Nathaniel Rich—facing “crises featuring or prominently including global warming” constitutes “the characters’ chief way of life” (Markley 2014, 264). The environmental crisis is no longer “a passive constituent of the background” but “a strange kind of entangling, nonhuman actor or active presence, one with which the characters engage, in a decidedly unequal *agon*” (2014, 265). This is largely true of the Science in the Capital trilogy, even though, as I argue here, Robinson’s decision to avoid writing the novels as sf thrillers to depict instead, from a mundane perspective, “how it might feel to live during climate change” (Canavan and Robinson 2014, 245) partly backfires. The author gets too involved with his (male) characters’ private lives—above all with the peculiar experiences of biomathematician, rock climber, and surfer Frank Vanderwal—to portray in sufficient detail the world-altering effects of drastic climate change, reaching a point that threatens to push the climate crisis too far into the background.

In fact, the prominence of the male characters in the three novels later subsumed into *Green Earth* indicates, whether this was the author’s intention or not, that climate change will always take a back seat in relation to the ongoing crisis of twenty-first century US masculinity, torn between the patriarchal model that denies climate change and will not face its responsibility in causing it and the progressive, ecofriendly model that lacks the necessary leadership. The Science in the Capital trilogy is not politically radical, but Robinson (a declared socialist) overtly endorses the Democratic Party, presented in the trilogy as a most desirable alternative to exploitative Republican politics. It is important to note that the trilogy (2004-2007) was published during the mandate of President George W. Bush (2001-2009), even though he is never mentioned in it. By the time *Green*

*Earth* was published, in 2015, President Barack Obama's mandate (2009-2017) was in its last phase. The first presidential mandate of the Republican President Donald Trump (2017-2021) started with his controversial decision, announced in 2017 and finalized in 2020, to withdraw the USA from the 2015 Paris Agreements, the first truly planetary action to stop climate change after the 1998 Kyoto Protocol. President Joe Biden (2021-2025) had the USA rejoin the agreements in February 2021, just one month after his inauguration. Yet, as soon as he was sworn in for a second mandate, on 20 January 2025, President Trump started a second process of withdrawal, currently still ongoing as I write (in January 2026). Trump has also ordered, to great international outrage, the US's full withdrawal from the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), thus severing all ties with the international organizations trying to stop the noxious effects of climate change.<sup>4</sup>

Evidence that Robinson's manifest interest in climate change is subordinate to his concerns about progressive masculinity is not hard to find. Robinson himself did acknowledge that "The biggest crisis in the story [of the trilogy] is thus not any weather event, but the scientist Frank going through a change of consciousness" (in Canavan and Robinson 2014, 245). The focus on Vanderwal, and on the other two main male characters—stay-at-home husband and part-time political advisor Charlie Quibler, and his boss, Senator Phil Chase (later elected President of the USA)<sup>5</sup>—led Jeanne Hamming to complain that Robinson's *Science in the Capital* trilogy "enlists climate change as a symbolic framework for reimagining American masculinity in a post-global warming future" (2013, 41). In her view, the trilogy's "conspicuous preoccupation with masculinity seems symptomatic, not of environmental crisis, but of identity crisis" (41), specifically as refers to progressive white US men's lack of a common agenda and, as noted, of political leadership. She wonders, however, whether Frank Vanderwal's characterization might be "ironic" since, after a violent assault, he becomes "a brain-damaged character"

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<sup>4</sup> See online the Presidential Memoranda of 7 January 2026, "Withdrawing the United States from International Organizations, Conventions, and Treaties that Are Contrary to the Interests of the United States" [accessed 9 January 2026]. The memoranda includes many other organizations, out of a total of 66, connected with climate change and other environmental issues.

<sup>5</sup> The *Science in the Capital* trilogy recycles two characters from *Antarctica* (1997): Senator Phil Chase and his chief of staff Wade Norton. Many readers and critics have noted similarities between Frank Vanderwal and a main character in Robinson's Martian trilogy, Saxifrage 'Sax' Russell, a scientist whose staunch defense of terraforming is moderated by a personal crisis that also turns him into a more emotional man interested in the social sciences.

who appears to be “mentally unstable” (41). During his recovery, Vanderwal himself wonders “if he had ever been quite sane” (GE 538), considering the many wrong decisions he has made throughout his life. My position is that Robinson is not using irony at all to undermine Vanderwal’s characterization; actually, globetrotting Phil Chase seems closer to being a caricature, in this case of the hyperactive politician. Rather, my concern, shared with Andrew Rose, is that although Vanderwal must “be read as an embodiment of multiple sets of privilege (white, male, straight, and able-bodied)” these are “never adequately examined in the novels,” which do not really explore the “hierarchical structures of power based in race, gender, and sexuality” (2016, 269). This is important because Vanderwal provides, as a scientist, the main solutions to halt climate change in Robinson’s trilogy. He seems, however, to find this task easier than solving the many problems that beset his rather wayward, disoriented masculinity.

Robinson’s later novels, *2123* (2012) and *The Ministry for the Future* (2020), show a manifest evolution in the author’s views on gender, with his exploration of future alternatives in the former and of current masculine vulnerability in the latter (see Martín 2022 and 2025, respectively). At the same time, the candid idealization of the three main male characters in *Science in the Capital* makes them quite remarkable as necessary, plausible models of US masculine involvement in solving the climate change crisis, hence my interest in them. I would insist nonetheless that we must distinguish between masculinity and patriarchy, an issue that still causes much confusion. Thus, Bob Pease stresses that

Men should bear the greatest responsibility for challenging environmental disasters because they are largely responsible for perpetrating them. We must be careful, however, not to see men’s power and dominance as reflective of some sort of essence within men which is universal and immutable. Men’s ecologically destructive actions have to be seen in historical and local social contexts because men are situated in particular geopolitical locations and particular material relations of power. (2021, 26)

It should be necessary, instead, to see that men (and women) can be found on both sides of the patriarchal divide and that climate change is in essence a patriarchal monstrosity resisted by many progressive men. Anti-patriarchal Frank, who is also a sociobiologist, points out that “*patriarchy as a solution to the parentage problem led to hatred, war, misogyny, harems, male control of reproductive rights, including anti-abortion laws (those photos of a dozen fat men grinning as they signed a law), and, ultimately, taken all in all, patriarchy led directly to the general very nonadaptive insanity that they lived in now*” (GE 831, original italics). Robinson’s main male characters (Frank,

Charlie, Phil) are not always consistently anti-patriarchal and progressive but they fight *as men* to stop and undo the violence that patriarchal *men* have inflicted on Earth, beginning with the USA. Robinson's gender politics may not be balanced enough (he could certainly have paid more attention to his female characters), but Vanderwal, Quibler and Chase are presented with all their hesitant vulnerabilities as embodiments of a progressive masculinity struggling to find utopian solutions to the disaster that patriarchy has caused, and as men very much involved in taking care of others. They are not at all impossible, saintly or utopian men but faulty, realistic male characters who understand the absolute need to fight climate change as part of a global community and not as traditional individualistic heroes. For this, their personal ties to women and their willingness to accept happy domesticity are essential, as I show next.

## **2. SEEKING FATHERHOOD AND LEADERSHIP AS CLIMATE CHANGE RAGES**

### **2.1. TOWARDS FATHERHOOD: FRANK VANDERWAL'S DOMESTICATION**

As noted, Robinson pays relative scant attention to the alarming weather events in the trilogy, which as Evans notes in her review of *Green Earth* are seen “[p]eering over Frank’s and Charlie’s shoulders” (2023, online). In *Forty Signs of Rain* heavy rainstorms flood Washington D.C., where the characters live, whereas in *Fifty Degrees Below*, as the title indicates, both Atlantic shores are affected by a long-lasting deep freeze. The melting of the Antarctic ice sheets and the subsequent rise of the sea level is the other main concern in this novel and in *Sixty Days and Counting*, whose title refers to the initial honeymoon period of Chase’s Presidency. The Russians and the Chinese are present tangentially when the former secretly and recklessly release in the Siberian forests a lichen (engineered by a US company) to trap carbon efficiently, and the latter accept US aid to switch practically overnight to clean solar energy (the path that real-life China is fast following). Other international efforts, also headed by the American National Science Foundation for which Frank works, include salting the oceans to stop the freezing of the Atlantic and pumping sea water back to the melting polar ice-caps (both ingenious projects follow his inspired proposals).

Although Robinson is hardly a chauvinist author, Milner and Burgmann complain that the low number of translations of the Science in the Capital trilogy might have to do with its narrow focus on “American internal politics that might not excite much international interest” (2020, 65). They add that while “It is easy to see why American readers might

find both Vanderwal and Chase plausible and attractive” (65), as representations of Robinson’s pragmatic utopian impulse, they might seem far less enticing to foreign readers. In another piece, Milner calls Frank a “mediocre protagonist” (2023, 110), though generally Vanderwal elicits a positive response from the commentators. Luckhurst, for instance, calls him “an impressively weird creation” (2019, 177). Kilgore praises Robinson for presenting Frank as “an ordinary man who is capable of ideological rigidity, poor judgment, and moral failure” but who, nevertheless, “aspires to be *a good man* whose particular gifts are part of the solution that Robinson’s fiction proposes,” not for selfish ends but to serve the community (2012, 96, italics added). Women are more skeptical about Vanderwal’s charms. Reviewer Rebecca Evans notes that “Frank’s affection for sociobiology never endeared him to me, particularly given the frequency with which his penchant for deep evolutionary explanations devolves into unapologetic sexual assessments of his female colleagues” (2019), a complaint that I find quite fitting. I grant that Frank Vanderwal’s behavior is often irritating, though I attribute this trait to Robinson’s wholehearted commitment to treating his characters as full persons, with all their defects, so as to avoid presenting them as mere ideological constructs.

Instead of focusing solely on Frank, as most analyses of the Science in the Capital trilogy do, I wish to compare him to Charlie Quibler, briefly considering their narrative arcs along the three years that the trilogy covers. The two men are connected through Charlie’s wife, Anna, a top scientist and the director of the Bioinformatics Division at the National Science Foundation, the institution for which Frank works temporarily, assessing grant proposals and, later, proposing plans of action. Vanderwal, a forty-three-year-old single, childless academic on a one-year leave from the University of California at San Diego, has also dabbled in the biotech business as consultant to Torrey Pines Generique, a start-up eventually sold off to a competitor.<sup>6</sup> At the start of *Green Earth* Charlie, aged forty-five, has been an environmental policy advisor to Senator Phil Chase for about one decade, spending the last seven years since the birth of his elder son, Nick, as Mr. Mom. As Charlie jokingly tells a male co-worker who praises him for his commitment to fatherhood, this was not an easy choice: “Well, I was thirty-eight when

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<sup>6</sup> Robinson rather misuses the subplot narrating how Frank manipulates the NSF board to reject a grant proposal by Yann Pierzinski, a brilliant young biomathematician. Vanderwal intends to headhunt Pierzinski for Torrey Pines, where the young man was briefly employed, but ultimately fails. Frank’s greedy shenanigans appear to be out of character for a scientist generally shown to be a man of great integrity.

Nick arrived, and I had been doing exactly what I wanted ever since I was eighteen. Twenty years of *white male American freedom*, just like what you have, young man, and then Nick arrived and suddenly I was at the command of a speechless mad tyrant” (*GE* 44, italics added). Loving this tyranny, Charlie fights to have Senator Chase allow him to continue working part-time from home to care for his second son, the fractious toddler Joe, for as long as possible.

Frank and Charlie become friends, though not too close, particularly after Anna befriends Drepung, a young Tibetan-Khembali refugee who presents himself as the translator of Khembalung’s new ambassador, the elderly Rudra Cakrin, when the embassy establishes itself in the same building where the NFS is located. Most commentators focus mainly on the year Frank spends secretly living in a tree house that he builds in Rock Creek Park after the flood makes renting an apartment in Washington D.C. quite difficult. Yet, in my view Frank should be read as a man longing for the domestic masculinity that Charlie embodies. In the first novel, *Forty Signs of Rain*, Frank enthuses about how his new “fully optimodal existence” (*GE* 341) allows him to juggle his multiple commitments to

1. pursue a project in paleolithic living,
2. change the weather,
3. attempt to restructure [my] profession, and
4. be happy (*GE* 341)

However, by the end of the second novel, *Fifty Degrees Below*, when Frank is sharing a room with Cakrin in the garden shed of the Khembalis’ Arlington compound, he feels disgruntled by the split that he perceives in his person: “It’s like living multiple lives. I mean I just act the parts. People believe me. But I don’t know what I feel. I don’t know what I mean” (*GE* 686). He concludes that “It is easy to live multiple lives! What is hard is to be a whole person” (86). My interpretation is that he finds this wholeness in his upcoming fatherhood, following Charlie’s example, though Frank does not specifically make the choice to become a father.

By the time *Green Earth* begins, Frank has gone through a bitter separation from his girlfriend Marta, another scientist, caused by his mortgaging in secret their home to invest in Torrey Pines (where she works). Marta hints that their disastrous breakup was the reason why Frank accepted the NSF’s invitation to spend a year in Washington D.C., as far away from California and her as possible. When Frank is preparing to return to San Diego, he enjoys an epiphanic moment elicited by Cakrin’s brown-bag lecture at the NSF.

Frank is silently berating himself for his “acid skepticism” (*GE* 184) about life in general when Cakrin declares that “An excess of reason is itself a form of madness” (184). This turns out to be a well-known Tibetan proverb, but Frank feels “as if he were a bell that had been struck” (184). Shaken out of his favorite fiction that he is a well-adjusted “thinking machine” (184), Frank must acknowledge that as a scientist he is as passionate as his colleague Anna, passion being the only attribute for which he distrusts her. As if more than one kind of passion had been unleashed by Cakrin’s words, on the way to the Quiblers’ home for dinner Frank is accidentally locked up in a malfunctioning Metro elevator with an attractive woman. Unexpectedly, she starts a sexual encounter, quickly interrupted when the machine starts working again. Smitten, but unable to contact the mysterious Caroline, as she is called, Frank later recalls the happy evening spent at the Quiblers’ after the incident. He jokes to himself that “the inwardness of the monogamous bond, the unconscious twin-world narcissism of it” is “disgusting!” (*GE* 208). Still, Frank grants that he “craved that very thing, that easy, deep intimacy that one could take for granted, could lose oneself in. [...] An urge seen in every human culture, and across many species too. It was not crazy of him to want it” (208).

This craving explains why Frank chases so insistently the reluctant Caroline, a pursuit which he complicates with his rash decision to write a long farewell letter to his boss, Diane Chang, a letter which is also a frontal attack against the NSF for its tepidness in the face of life-threatening climate change. Frank realizes too late that he must retrieve the letter or miss the chance to renew his NSF contract and find Caroline. In fact, both women manipulate the rather naïve Frank. Diane never mentions the letter, subtly coercing Vanderwal into becoming as active as he thinks the NSF should be in its struggle against climate change. Caroline, actually a Government spy who presents herself as a basic surveillance agent (Frank is one of her targets) but who is also involved in the dark anti-democratic operations of her superior and husband Ed, controls their ambiguous romance. She even decides for Frank when they are ready to become a couple and have a child. Caroline’s shifty, overbearing behavior partly undermines the believability of their romance, though she seems to understand better than Vanderwal himself that he has been lusting after domesticity as much as he has been lusting after her.

That Caroline is a central element in Frank’s domestication can be seen in that, as King notes, Frank’s rather long spell living in his city park tree house ends for good when her jealous estranged husband destroys it; then Frank needs “to move back ‘indoors’” (2015, 208) with the help of his new Khembali friends. For King, the whole point of the

preposterous conspiracy plot involving Caroline is “precisely to serve as a dialectical negation to Frank’s nostalgic retreat” (207) into a sort of safe wilderness. I would stress that the retreat to the tree house only happens because Caroline keeps disappearing as a sort of elusive *femme fatale*. The moment Ed is arrested and Caroline is finally free to divorce him, Frank wastes no time to show her San Diego, where he wants them to live together; surprising him, she announces her apparently unplanned pregnancy during this visit. The trilogy ends with Frank and Caroline together after a party that gathers all the main characters and with one of them, most likely she, though Robinson does not identify the speaker, declaring “I love you”—as a menacing storm gathers in the background.

Frank’s passion for Emerson and, above all, Thoreau, is perfectly compatible with domesticity, since in fact the latter’s famous Walden years were profoundly domestic; far from being isolated from society, Thoreau stayed connected constantly to family and friends. There is, nonetheless, a certain paradoxical reluctance on Frank’s side to allow himself to be fully domesticated, which explains his enjoyment of the evening company provided by the homeless black Vietnam veterans and the freegan frisbee players of Rock Creek Park. These underprivileged men gently mock Frank, knowing that the ‘Professer’, as they call him, is a privileged man enjoying a self-chosen kind of circumstantial homelessness, which is why they accept only reluctantly his gifts of warm winter gear. The brutal assault by some unidentified racist vandals that Frank tries to stop is a symbolic punishment for his fake homelessness. The violence results in a persistent brain injury (a subdural hematoma) that leaves Frank unable to take decisions for about a year and a half. Only the death of his new Khembali roommate, old Rudra Cakrin himself, whom Frank sees as a sort of guru since the epiphanic lunch lecture, prompts him to undergo surgery and resume his search for Caroline and, hence, for domestic happiness.

## **2.2. MILITANT FATHERHOOD: CHARLIE QUIBLER’S HAPPY DOMESTICITY**

Frank’s longing for domesticity and Charlie’s domestic life do not mean that they assume a passive role before the climate change crisis, quite the opposite. Following Diane’s lead, Frank displays all his capacity to dream up the daring plans that help to restart the Atlantic gulf stream current and hopefully to stop the rising sea levels. Charlie calls his belief that the world must be saved so that science can proceed with a significantly new paradigm the “Frank Principle” (*GE* 228). His own contribution is essential in Senator Chase’s awakening to the need to act bravely, using legislation to stop climate change; Charlie even convinces Chase to run for President because “[w]e need help. It’s more than just

cleaning up the city here. It's the whole world needs help now" (*GE* 323). In his bid for leadership, Chase makes considerable personal sacrifices (he is even shot by a psychotic hater), but Robinson's focus on Frank and Charlie shows that he is not interested in any sacrificial hero. Robinson, who, as noted, was himself a stay-at-home dad, is particularly keen to defend Charlie's decision to remain as close as possible to his toddler Joe—a personal choice presented as a basic right—and in suggesting that men like Charlie and Frank can work at their best to save the planet only if they are emotionally fulfilled.

Charlie's understanding of fatherhood is peculiar since he is far less involved with his son Nick, who is seven at the start of *Green Earth*, than with little Joe. Actually, Nick mainly interacts with Frank, who becomes a sort of cool uncle with whom the boy participates in the city's search for the zoo animals freely roaming Washington D.C. since the flood. Joe, who is not yet two at the beginning of the novel (he is still breastfeeding and learning to speak), is a very demanding little boy, which means that Charlie's parenting is far from placid. This leads to some comedy, such as the scene in which Charlie laughs in the face of the Republican President (supposed to be George W. Bush) when he takes the boy to a key meeting and the sleepy Joe suckles his father's neck, tickling him. There is also some comedy in the bizarre subplot by which Charlie initially demands that the Khembalis exorcise the mischievous spirit dominating his little boy only to ask, when Joe suddenly starts behaving sedately, that he be possessed again. One of the Khembalis explains to Caroline who was really exorcised: "We had to exorcise Frank's friend Charlie twice [...] to drive out some bad ideas that had taken root in him. But I believe it worked in the end" (*GE* 1059). Far more serious is Charlie's defense of his right to protect the conciliation of his family life and his job after the solution that the newly elected President Chase proposes (that Joe uses the White House's daycare facilities while his father works) fails because of the long hours involved. Chase graciously relents, accepting Charlie's request to work from home two more years until Joe can be sent to kindergarten. Charlie realizes that "He was lucky he had as much as he had" and admits that he will have "to keep working hard to stay innovative from home" (*GE* 1033) to help the President save the nation.

At the end of *Green Earth*, Frank prepares to become a husband and father, whereas Charlie prepares to face the eventual separation from his adult children, alerted by Frank's parting suggestion that teen Nick should eventually become a student at UCSD. Unwittingly, Frank also gives Charlie a precious gift when, seeing he is concerned that the rebellious Joe might not be able to navigate growing up, he reassures him that "Your

kids will be fine” (*GE* 905). This is what Charlie needs to feel confident as a man, apart from his wife Anna’s constant support and love: reassurance from a male friend that he is doing well as a father.

### **2.3. TWO LEADERS: PHIL CHASE’S EMPOWERMENT AND DREPUNG’S DISEMPOWERMENT**

Most chapters of the *Science in the Capital* trilogy are focalized through Frank and Charlie (some through Anna), whereas Phil Chase’s direct voice is only dominant in the few posts of his blog *Cut to the Chase* that Robinson reproduces. His importance in the plot is undeniable, yet Phil is a secondary character despite eventually becoming the leader of the USA as the new Democrat President. Although Robinson parades quite explicitly Chase’s admiration for Abraham Lincoln (actually the first Republican president) and Frankling Delano Rosevelt, Milner and Burgmann describe him as “an idealised amalgam of an Al Gore who managed to get elected and a Barack Obama who managed to get things done” (2020, 65).<sup>7</sup> Cho remarks that whereas Gore has always seen climate change as “the greatest threat to our existence,” Robinson (and certainly Chase) also see it as an opportunity for civilization’s regeneration, which is a sign of “the radical distance separating the most progressive liberal from the utopian” (2011, 46). Cho maintains that Chase’s appeal as a politician is that he does not “prescribe, but provoke” (46), inviting his fellow citizens with his pragmatic and courageous legislation and his bold executive decisions to take “a giant leap into the wilderness” (46). After the election, Chase appoints Diane Chang to be his Science Advisor, following Charlie’s suggestion. Both Chase and Diane have been widowed for years and Frank’s matchmaking (an extension of his own craving for domesticity) leads to their discreet private wedding, blessed by the Dalia Lama (as is the couple formed by Frank and Caroline). Chase and Diane’s marriage “provides the moral for the trilogy, that only science and politics in concord will save the day; it is such concord that enables the narrative’s large-scale scientific interventions, which ultimately mitigate and stabilise the many climate change disasters” (Johns-Putra 2010, 752).

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<sup>7</sup> Gore won the popular vote in the 2000 presidential election but the Supreme Court stopped the controversial vote recount in Florida, where Jeb Bush was Governor, granting his brother George the advantage he needed to win. Gore conceded his defeat, focusing next his energies on environmental activism, as shown by Davis Guggenheim’s Oscar-award winning documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006). Obama’s apparently successful presidency, sowed the seeds of Donald Trump’s unexpected victory against the Democrat candidate, Senator Hillary Clinton.

Chase's happy empowerment, however, masks the far less felicitous disempowerment of the patient, uncomplaining Drepung, a quite different type of leader. Khembalung is a fictional island nation located in the Sundarbans, the delta area in the Bay of Bengal at the confluence of the Ganges, the Brahmaputra and the Meghna rivers. The 12000 Khembalis are Tibetan refugees persecuted by the Chinese and granted ownership of the island by the Indians. Unfortunately, the rising Indian ocean swallows Khembalung during a visit paid by the Quibler family with Frank. Because of this tragic loss of land and lives, the Arlington compound becomes Khembalung to all political effects, while the surviving Khembalis stranded there and in India wait for a solution. For Markley, the Khembalis "serve as a chorus for the efforts of Frank, Charlie, Anna, Phil and Diane as they struggle to resacralize humankind's relationship to a natural world that is very different from the one described by Emerson and Thoreau" (2012, 10). On his side, Pak appreciates that "By representing their interests and by recontextualising the role of science for society, the Khembalis widen the pool of interests that any attempt to address climate change must take into account" (2017, 168). In contrast, Schneider-Mayerson protests that not only does Robinson's original trilogy lack a fair representation of the mostly non-white population of Washington D.C. but that the author "sacrifices climate justice verisimilitude to use non-Western characters as stereotypical representatives of ancient and exotic wisdom" which, besides, misrepresents "the forceful and public activism of real island nations' citizens and leaders" (2019, 954). This misrepresentation was not corrected in *Green Earth*.

Robinson, a committed Buddhist, seems less interested in the sad fate of Khembalung than in the possibility of, he says, "combining or enjambling the two systems" of Western and Eastern knowledge and wisdom. "I want there to be a Buddhist science," he declares, "or a scientific Buddhism, and maybe there already is" (in Yaszek and Davis 2012, 195). This yearning explains Frank's deep crisis but does extraordinarily little for Drepung as a man and as a careworn national leader. Yost explains that "[p]rincipled leadership expects leaders to be 'good,' rather than 'great.' Many leaders can achieve moments of greatness in achieving a goal, overcoming an obstacle, or defeating an enemy. The larger challenge for leaders is to act morally on a relentless moment-to-moment basis under duress, while pursuing goals and maintaining group cohesion" (2013, 14). Robinson gives this chance to act morally to Phil Chase as part of the process of empowerment that leads him to renew the American presidency, but deprives Drepung of any agency at all. In a rather odd turn of events, Drepung explains to Frank and Charlie that he is actually

Gendun Chökyi Nyima, the real-life XI Panchen Lama persecuted by the Chinese, who has been missing since 1995. Drepung has pretended to be just Cakrin's translator to keep a low profile, though the disclosure of his real identity does not truly give him a political voice of his own. Ultimately, he needs to depend on the kindness of strangers—from Anna Quibler to Phil Chase—to survive, hoping that the new President's negotiations with India and China ease the tragic fate of being a landless refugee who can never return home. This is a personal and collective tragedy for which there is in the end little room in Robinson's otherwise utopian perspective on both progressive masculinity and climate change, even though the Khembalis stand for all the underprivileged human beings most directly threatened by patriarchy-related climate change.

#### **4. CONCLUSION: MEN WHO CARE**

Kim Stanley Robinson's Science in the Capital trilogy and its shortened version *Green Earth* offer hope of scientific and political regeneration through Frank Vanderwal, Charlie Quibler and Phil Chase, though the author is no doubt guilty, as Jeanne Hamming protested, of giving prominence to US men's identity crises over the planet's environmental crisis. Additionally, this personal identity crisis is narrowly focused on three white men who occupy privileged positions and, in President Chase's case, the very core of US hegemonic masculinity. Robinson places women in far more marginal positions, though Anna, and, above all Diane as the head of the NSF, play significant roles. Men of color are also marginalized, with Robinson unfairly exoticizing Tibetan-Khembali leader Drepung.

Nonetheless, Frank's complex personal crisis, Charlie's fierce defense of his parental rights, and Phil's brave assumption of the American Presidency may persuade other privileged good men among *Green Earth's* readers of the need to act, which is always a positive contribution on Robinson's side, far from the aloof, withdrawn attitude of literary novelists towards climate change. There is, then, an urgent political message implicit in Robinson's much needed pragmatic yet utopian fiction: striving for personal happiness is fine, but only as long as democracy is maintained and the right leaders are elected to guarantee the survival of the planet. The men who care for others can defeat patriarchy and are indeed invited to do so by imitating the three central male characters. It is now time to imagine a utopia in which the main players are other types of progressive men

from other races and nations, women, or, indeed, persons with a different understanding of gender.

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