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Future's Past: Review of Robert Charles Wilson's  
*Julian Comstock: A Story of 22nd-Century America*

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encourages exhumation, but, as Negarestani explains, exhumation always defaces. This suggests that there is an important political link between the anonymous, nonhuman, and blobjective to the human, interpretative and critical. Negarestani cites this as an issue of archaeology; quoting Parsani, “‘archaeology, with its ingrained understanding of Hidden Writing, will dominate the politics of future and will be the military science of twenty-first century.’” Thus, Hidden Writing maintains a political fidelity to the blobjective, but this can alter when exhumed or interpreted—hence, the archaeological dimension.

*Cyclonopedia’s* critical intervention becomes the lesson that an archaeological method cannot follow or maintain fidelity to any particular discipline because the blobjective does not respect professionally determined terrains of thought. Negarestani’s *Cyclonopedia* is a work of Hidden Writing. By using collective authorship and a hidden story of our present embedded in ancient heretical texts and relics, Negarestani delivers an enigmatic and horrific mix of theory-fiction as archaeological ungrounding—but there can and must be other ways. This, in fact, is why *Cyclonopedia* is so popular: it begs to be exhumed itself. Underneath lies a story

of war in the Middle East, but there are also stories of media, queerness, art, and architecture. What *Cyclonopedia* assures is that oil will always be found running through these stories, keeping them weirdly holey and inauthentic.

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## Future’s Past

Gerry Canavan

### JULIAN COMSTOCK: A STORY OF 22ND-CENTURY AMERICA

Robert Charles Wilson

Tor Books

<http://www.tor.com>

416 pages; cloth, \$25.95; paper, \$8.99; eBook, \$8.99

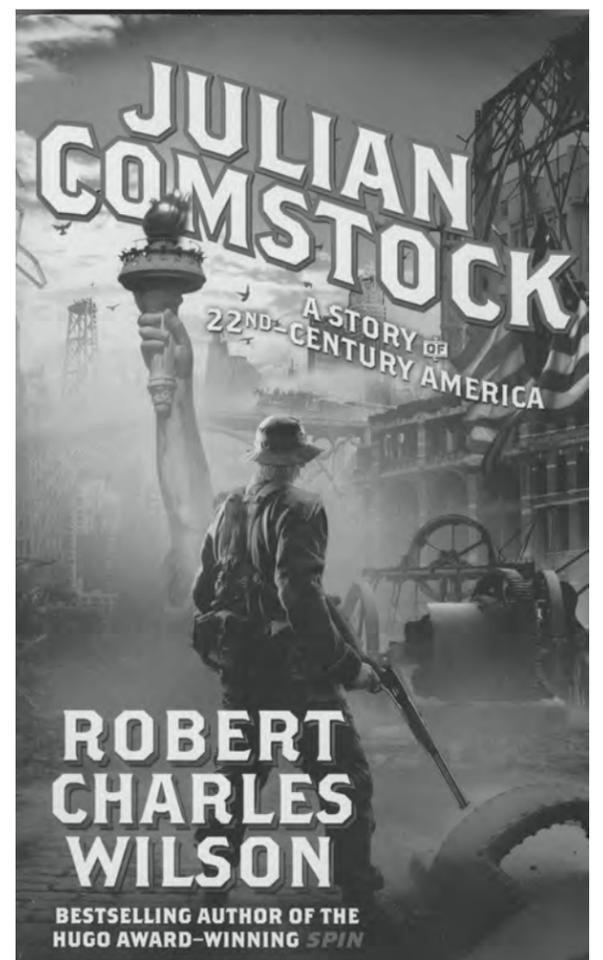
In *The 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852) Karl Marx notes G. W. F. Hegel’s claim that “all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice”: first as tragedy, then as farce. For Marx, the Roman affectations of the French Revolution represented precisely this sort of uncanny repetition—as did the Old Testament interests of Cromwellites during the English Civil War and the French Revolution of 1848’s aping of the previous revolutions of 1789 and 1793–1795, “[i]n like manner a beginner who has learnt a new language always translates it back into his mother tongue.” History repeats, the thinking goes, not as some inevitable law of the universe but as a basic tendency of human nature—history repeats because our impoverished imaginations can only very rarely conceive the truly new. More commonly, in attempting to look forward, we find ourselves instead simply looking backward.

### *Julian Comstock envisions the post-petroleum world as the return of obsolete historical social forms.*

This principle seems particularly important in recent science fiction that attempts to depict the world after Peak Oil. As Imre Szeman, among others, has noted, cheap, easily extractable petroleum is now so central to the workings of contemporary capitalism that almost no aspect of the present system could function without it. Consequently, as Szeman writes, “Oil capital seems to represent a stage that neither capital nor its opponents can think beyond.” In the absence of some sufficient substitute for oil’s energy miracle—in the absence, that is, of a future that is both prosperous and *possible*—the only solution for the imagination seems to be to cast itself into history in search of the secret of what’s to come. For James Howard Kunstler (a leading Jeremiah of the coming post-oil “long emergency”), the title of his 2008 novel *World Made by Hand* suggests what he sees as the only conceivable alternative to the global oil economy: a return to the hyperlocal artisan economy of the early nineteenth-century U.S. In Paolo Baciga-

lupi’s *The Windup Girl* (2009), the end of oil similarly entails a return to the past; the novel is set several hundred years after the end of oil, which has come to be retrospectively recognized as the end of both globalization and U.S./Western hegemony and the start of a century-long period of breakdown and disaster known as “The Contraction.” To the people of this distant future time, the oil age is remembered as a distant “golden age”—but one that is permanently and hopelessly in the past, never to return.

Robert Charles Wilson’s *Julian Comstock*, too, envisions the post-petroleum world as the return of obsolete historical social forms. Wilson’s previous novel, the Hugo Award-winning *Spin* (2005), imagined a universe in which time begins to move *too fast*; mysterious aliens sealed the Earth inside a stasis bubble, condemning us to watch years pass by in minutes, millennia in months. *Julian Comstock*, in a way, poses the opposite problem: a history that has lost any ability to progress at all, that indeed has begun to move backwards. The contemporary era has come to be remembered by the people of 2172 as the “Efflorescence of Oil,” the word “efflorescence” describing the evaporating of water that leaves behind a thin layer of salty detritus. Here, that detritus is the ruined remains of our own twentieth- and twenty-first-century lives: the hardship and dislocation of global collapse, the inscrutable plastic junk that litters their countryside, their myths that man once walked on the moon, a generally ruined world. American life has become much more technologically constrained; New York is considered the greatest city in the world in part because it still manages electrical illumination for four hours every day. American democracy has been completely transformed: the presidency is now an inherited, aristocratic office; the House of Representatives has apparently been abolished; elections are purely symbolic, empty rituals, primarily enacted for the purposes of military recruitment in an endless series of imperial wars; the first amendment has been altered to protect only “Freedom of Pious Assembly” and “Acceptable Speech”; and a destroyed Washington, D.C. is perpetually in the process of “restoration” that never quite materializes. (Parodying the American right’s devotion to the fantasy of an immortal, unchanging constitution despite all this upheaval, Americans of the twenty-second century nevertheless speak in reverent tones of their “Debt to the Past” and thank Providence that U.S. governmental institutions all survived the end of oil “intact.”) The unholy combination of the end of oil with global warming has decimated the world’s population through starvation, deprivation, and disease; the society that has ultimately emerged out of the disaster has abandoned science, reason, and democracy in favor of superstition, theocracy, and authoritarianism. This is a world where the very



idea of philosophy is considered an official heresy, where Tim LaHaye (author of the *Left Behind* series) is thought of as a theologian on par with Augustine or Aquinas—truly, a fallen world.

Julian Comstock, the title character, is the son of a dead general and nephew of the current President—an echo of *Hamlet* that is of course deliberate and played with throughout. The chief protagonist, Adam Hazzard, our narrator, is his childhood friend and eventual biographer. The two, having grown up together in rural obscurity, become swept up by the draft into the latest war against the Dutch for control of Newfoundland in hopes of controlling the global-warming-opened Northwest Passage. The events of the war catapult Julian into the public fame—and the public rivalry with his uncle—he has never wanted, throwing him ultimately into the imperial presidency itself. (This is not to give anything away; we learn from the first page of the prologue, before we know anything else about him, that the kind and bookish Julian is eventually known to history as “Julian Conqueror.”)

Here, then, is what science fiction looks like without (or after) the future: the twentieth century is envisioned not as the launching pad for a glorious technofuture but as an anomalous moment of prosperity and historical possibility that quickly

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burns itself out, leaving in its place the worst combination of Manifest Destiny America, feudal Europe, and decadent Rome. The novel's odd, melancholy temporality—a retrospectively narrative Bildungsroman set in a future that is simultaneously a parody of the past—completely upends our sense that the last hundred years represent the apex of progress and indeed the idea that history can be thought of as any story of progress at all. By its end, *Julian Comstock* has taken its reader well beyond the postmodern mood Fredric Jameson famously called “nostalgia for the present” and comes to feel something like officiating at our own collective funeral.

But for all its anticipatory retrospection of the coming post-oil disaster, the novel is not hopeless. In the epilogue, we are told that Adam has in essence gone on to reinvent the lost art of science fiction

itself; in 2192, his most recent novel is *American Boys on the Moon*, a Jules-Verne-style adventure yarn about a group of youngsters who discover an old NASA rocket buried in Florida and use it to reach the moon. (In a footnote, Adam concedes that the story is completely implausible but admits he likes it anyway.) There are similar hints throughout the novel that a second age of enlightenment and invention could be in the offing, and indeed that the reign of the despotic and theocratic Dominion may soon be at its end. Theocrats are themselves huge believers in progress, insisting that “the history of the world is written in Scripture, and it ends in a Kingdom”—but Julian's revolutionary retort, seemingly borne out, is that history is actually chaos, written in sand and shaped by the wind. For Wilson, it seems, there's an exciting, even necessary freedom in this permanent historical flux, which when juxtaposed against the

violent schemes of the rich and powerful becomes in its own unstable and impermanent way a kind of unexpected utopia. The cyclicity of history turns out to be as cruel to kings and tyrants as it is to everything else; in time, all their dreams of power and control turn to ash as well. Even in a history that can't stop repeating itself, we find that the bad times eventually end and that good days someday come again.

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## Mining the Story

Jon Gordon

### EXTRACTION! COMIX REPORTAGE

Frédéric Dubois, Marc Tessier, and  
David Widginton, eds.

Cumulus Press  
<http://cumuluspress.burningbillboard.org>  
128 pages; cloth, CDN \$20.00

Is it a good idea to write a news story as a graphic book? Cumulus Press's 2007 offering *EXTRACTION! Comix Reportage* gambles on “yes” to tell four stories of global mining practices. Each story pairs an investigative reporter with a comix artist to explore the practices of Canadian mining corporations in Sipakapa [*sic*], Guatamala (Goldcorp); Mont Laurier, Quebec (Nova Uranium); Kashipur and Orissa, India (Alcan); and Fort McMurray, Alberta (Syncrude, Suncor, Shell). The first three chart journalists' visits to communities affected by mining and recount interviews, confrontations, and personal reflections. The last reportage creates a fictional speaker to tell its story.

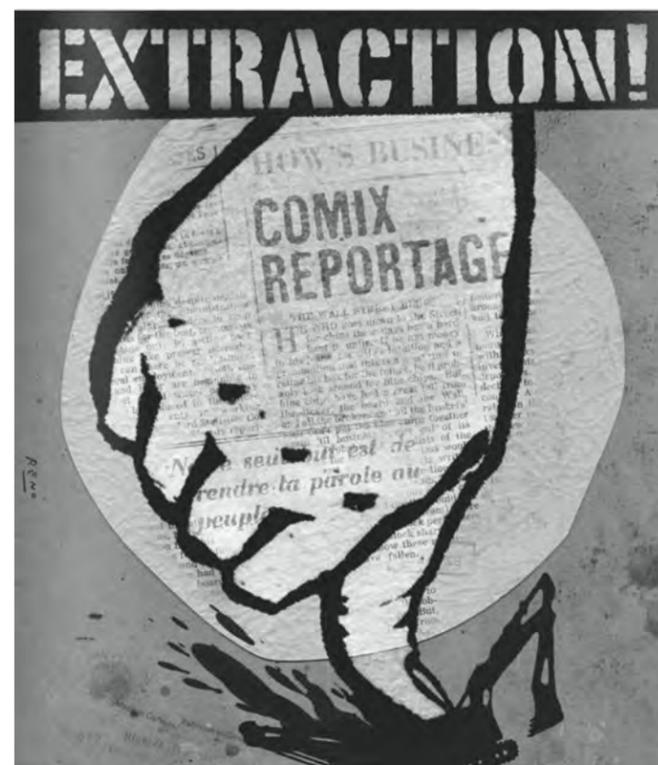
***Telling and sharing are only  
revolutionary if there is an  
audience that will listen.***

For a book of 128 pages, it offers 31 of apparatus, including a foreword, an introduction, an epilogue, a glossary, contributors' bios, and acknowledgements. The introduction, foreword, and epilogue all strike on the theme of how hard it was to put this book together, and it is not too difficult to imagine the challenges of coordinating the efforts of 14 contributors. David Widginton writes in the foreword

Our approach to comix journalism... raised many questions and provided us with significant challenges. The resulting four comix reportages certainly meet our expectations and probably surpass them, although once the decision was made...to proceed with *EXTRACTION!*, its very prospect at the time inhibited all expectations.

The results may surpass the editors' inhibited expectations, but the book's apparatus seems to be working hard to manage readers'. In the epilogue, Marc Tessier explains that “the salary the artists and the staff received, compared to professional rates, covered the cost of only a couple of comix pages. To ask our contributors to draw twenty pages and make changes every step of the way was a huge deal.” All of this metadiscussion gives this reviewer the sense that the finished product didn't live up to the hopes of its creators.

This sense may be the result of the labor- and cost-intensive collaboration involved in the book's production, but these factors may also mean that the graphic book is not the genre best suited to investigative journalism. There is very little action here for the artists to capture on the page, and the stories are incredibly complicated, stretching back decades. When Dawn Paley accompanies a representative of the Sipakapa [*sic*] community to Goldcorp's Annual General Meeting in Vancouver to speak about opposition to the mining project, they ask CEO Kevin McArthur if Goldcorp will respect the results of the local consulta that found clear opposition to the mine project. Eventually, they extract a clear “no” from him. However, and unsurprisingly, this changes nothing in terms of company policy, and the piece ends with a rather limp resolve to continue fighting for justice. Similarly, even though Alcan pulls out of the Utkal Alumina International Limited bauxite mining conglomerate in India, the company continues to supply the mine with technology and claims at the 2007 AGM (Associated Grant Makers) that it “does not hold any legal obligations to pay damages” to villagers displaced, arrested, and even shot for their opposition. Tessier writes that, “To make these stories emotionally resonant, we as editors, moved to emphasize the people on par with the journalistic content.... A human visage has so much more depth, beauty and dignity than any ordinary map.” True, no doubt, but even when the artists have the opportunity, as in the above climactic moments, to show more than interviews, there is too little room for context, history, and an understanding of the people involved. Despite the traumas inflicted on the affected communities, the stories do not have space to represent those traumas in such a way that the reader experiences their tragedy. This reviewer is



left wondering if these stories would have been told more effectively as documentary films.

The section likely of most interest to readers of petrofiction is the fourth and final section, “From the bottom of the pit,” which explores Alberta's bitumen mining industry. This comic, though, which depicts a soapbox speaker gathering a crowd as he describes the environmental consequences of the industry, presents an additional difficulty. In order to create some dramatic tension, the artists have created both a fictional speaker and a comic within a comic. While the speaker describes how the U.S.-based Pew Charitable Trusts, created by Philadelphia oil tycoon and founder of bitumen mining company Suncor, J. Howard Pew, funnels money to Canadian environmental organizations, the pictures show a man in a top hat carrying bags of money across the border to hand out to ducks, wolves, and bears. The speaker concludes, “environmental organizations adopting a docile ‘low-hanging fruit’ strategy soon after being bankrolled by Pew has been thoroughly documented by U.S. activists and investigative reporters.” In both the foreword and the epilogue, the editors discuss how this section blurs fact and fiction. Tessier defends the decision: “As long as we stuck to the core truth of the piece and were ethical and respectful, we

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