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# Climate Fiction and Literary Activism: Imagining the Anthropocene through Narrative Intervention

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## Abstract

*This article examines climate fiction (commonly abbreviated as cli-fi) as a site where literary form and political action converge in the era of anthropogenic ecological crisis. Drawing on ecocriticism, Anthropocene studies, postcolonial environmental humanities, and recent empirical reception research, the essay argues that climate fiction operates not merely as thematic engagement with environmental concern but as a mode of literary activism: a discursive intervention that reorganises perception, reshapes affect, and recalibrates the moral imagination of its readers. Beginning with the genealogy and contested definition of the genre, the discussion moves through major Anglophone novels (Atwood, Robinson, McCarthy, Powers, Kingsolver), Global South and decolonial counter-narratives (Ghosh, Habila, Sinha), and emergent forms such as solarpunk, Indigenous futurisms, and young-adult cli-fi. The article identifies four mechanisms by which climate fiction performs activism—cognitive scaling, affective rehearsal, ethical extension, and counter-discursive imagining—while taking the critiques of genre commodification, anthropocentric humanism, and the limited empirical evidence of behavioral change seriously. The essay concludes that climate fiction's activist value lies less in producing converts than in furnishing a shared vocabulary of catastrophe and possibility, without which collective political imagination cannot proceed.*

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**Keywords**: - Climate Fiction, Cli-Fi, Ecocriticism, Anthropocene, Literary Activism, Environmental Humanities, Narrative Ethics, Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Solarpunk, Indigenous futurisms.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In The Great Derangement (2016), the novelist and essayist Amitav Ghosh poses a question that has since become foundational to environmental literary studies: why has the modern serious novel proven so reluctant to engage the climate crisis? For Ghosh, the failure is not incidental but structural. The realist novel, with its Aristotelian preference for the probable over the possible and its preoccupation with bourgeois interiority, has rendered the planetary scale of climate change formally illegible (Ghosh, 2004). To imagine, in fictional terms, a cyclone that does what no cyclone has done before, or a coastline that ceases to exist, is to risk being read as fantasy. The catastrophe of our era, in other words, is a crisis of representation as much as one of carbon.

It is against this backdrop that the contemporary phenomenon of climate fiction a body of narrative writing that takes anthropogenic climate change as central rather than incidental subject matter has emerged as both a literary category and an activist project. The neologism cli-fi, popularised by the journalist and climate communicator Dan Bloom around 2008, has migrated from the margins of speculative reviewing into mainstream press coverage, university syllabi, and peer-reviewed monographs (Trexler,2015; Mehnert, 2016). What began as a journalistic shorthand now names a transmedial archive that includes literary and genre fiction, young-adult novels, graphic narratives, theatre, and increasingly streaming television.

This article advances three linked claims. First, climate fiction is best understood not as a stable genre defined by motifs but as a mode of writing that crosses genre boundaries realist, speculative, dystopian, utopian, gothic because climate change itself defies generic containment (Johns-Putra,2019). Second, climate fiction performs literary activism: it is implicated in, and reshapes, public deliberation about ecological futures, even when its individual texts disclaim political intent. Third, the activist work of climate fiction is more accurately described as infrastructural than persuasive: rather than converting readers to particular policy positions, climate fiction supplies the metaphors, scenarios, and structures of feeling without which collective political imagination could not proceed (Heise,2008; Schneider-Mayerson,2018).

To develop these claims, the article moves through six sections. Section 2 traces the genealogy and contested definition of the field. Section 3 sketches the theoretical frameworks ecocriticism, Anthropocene studies, material ecocriticism through which climate fiction has been read. Section 4 surveys major Anglophone texts, while Section 5 turns to postcolonial and Global South counter-archives. Section 6 articulates four mechanisms of literary activism, and Section 7 engages the most serious critiques of the field. The conclusion reflects on emergent forms, including solarpunk, Indigenous climate fiction, and young-adult writing, and on the political stakes of imagining otherwise.

## II. GENEALOGY AND CONTESTED DEFINITION OF CLIMATE FICTION

Although the term cli-fi is recent, the literary tradition it names is not. Critics including Adam Trexler, Antonia Mehnert, and Adeline Johns-Putra have traced its long lineage through nineteenth-century catastrophe narratives, the eco-disaster fiction of the 1960s and 1970s, and the climate-inflected speculative writing that emerged after the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's first assessment report in 1990 (Trexler 2015; Mehnert,2016). Mary Shelley's The Last Man (1826) anticipates the genre's apocalyptic cadences; J. G. Ballard's quartet of elemental disaster novels in the 1960s The Drowned World (1962), The Drought (1965), The Crystal World (1966), and The Burning World (1964) stages climatic transformation as both psychic and meteorological event.

What distinguishes the contemporary moment is not the existence of the form but its institutionalisation. By the second decade of the twenty-first century, climate fiction had acquired its own academic monographs (Trexler; Mehnert; Johns-Putra; Andersen), pedagogical anthologies, journal special issues (notably in Environmental Humanities, ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment, and Resilience), and reading-group guides distributed by environmental NGOs. The website Cli-Fi Central lists thousands of titles; the academic journal American Book Review devoted its 2018 spring issue to the genre.

The definitional debate within the field turns on two axes. The first concerns centrality: must climate change be the principal subject, or is its presence as backdrop sufficient? Trexler argues for a generous definition that admits novels in which climate operates as structuring condition rather than thematic focus, on the grounds that climate change is, definitionally, a phenomenon of context rather than incident (Trexler,2015). The second concerns generic affiliation: critics including Andrew Milner and J. R. Burgmann have contended that climate fiction is most productively understood as a sub-current of science fiction, given the latter's historical capacity to think systemically and at scale (Milner and Burgmann,2020). Others, notably Astrid Bracke, have argued that the realist climate novel is undergoing a quiet revolution that should not be assimilated to genre conventions (Bracke,2018 ). The most useful synthesis, offered by Johns-Putra, treats climate fiction as a mode rather than a genre a tendency that surfaces across forms, marked less by shared motifs than by a shared recognition of climatic agency (Johns-Putra, 2019).

## III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS: ECOCRITICISM, ANTHROPOCENE STUDIES, AND BEYOND

The critical reception of climate fiction has been shaped by three intersecting currents in the environmental humanities. The first is ecocriticism, formalised in the 1990s with the founding of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) and articulated paradigmatically in Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's The Ecocriticism Reader (1996). Lawrence Buell's subsequent work, particularly The Future of Environmental Criticism (2005), distinguishes 'first-wave' ecocriticism, with its preoccupation with wilderness and nature writing, from 'second-wave' approaches attentive to urban, industrial, and toxic landscapes (Buell,2005). Climate fiction belongs decisively to the second wave and beyond: its landscapes are saturated, polluted, anthropogenic.

The second current is Anthropocene studies, named after the geological proposal by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer (2000) that human activity now constitutes a planetary geological force. For literary critics including Timothy Clark and Tobias Menely, the Anthropocene poses a problem of scale: how does narrative, with its commitments to character and event, register a phenomenon whose temporal and spatial extents exceed any single human life (Clark,2015)? Clark's notion of scale effects the way meaning shifts as one zooms between local and planetary perspectives has been particularly generative for readings of climate fiction. Ursula Heise's Sense of Place and Sense of Planet (2008) influentially proposes 'eco-cosmopolitanism' as the cultural response adequate to planetary risk (Heise,2016).

The third current is material ecocriticism, associated with Serenella Iovino, Serpil Oppermann, Stacy Alaimo, and Jane Bennett. Drawing on new materialism and the broader 'nonhuman turn,' this body of work insists that matter itself is agentic, narrative, and meaningful what Alaimo terms trans-corporeality, the recognition that the human body is porously continuous with its toxic environs (Alaimo,2010). Donna Haraway's exhortation to 'stay with the trouble' and her preference for the term Chthulucene over Anthropocene highlight the multispecies entanglements that climate fiction is increasingly drawn to represent (Haraway,2016). To these one must add the powerful recent intervention of Kathryn

Yusoff, whose A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None (2018) insists that the geological epoch was inaugurated not in 1945 or 1784 but in the colonial extractivism of the early modern period, and that any environmental humanities that does not begin from this fact will reproduce the very erasures it claims to redress (Yusoff,2018).

## IV. THE ANGLOPHONE CLIMATE NOVEL: MAJOR TEXTS AND TENDENCIES

Surveying the Anglophone climate novel reveals not a single trajectory but at least four overlapping tendencies: the dystopian-apocalyptic, the speculative-systemic, the realist-affective, and the multispecies-ecological.

### 4.1. The Dystopian-Apocalyptic Mode

Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam trilogy Oryx and Crake (2003), The Year of the Flood (2009), and MaddAddam (2013) is perhaps the most ambitious dystopian climate fiction in English. Atwood, who prefers the term speculative fiction to science fiction, depicts a near-future in which corporate biotechnology, runaway warming, and deepening inequality converge in a engineered pandemic that all but extinguishes humanity. Her insistence on extrapolating only from extant technologies makes the trilogy unsettlingly proximate (Atwood,2003). Cormac McCarthy's The Road (2006) offers a starker, more elemental apocalypse: an unspecified catastrophe often read by ecocritics as a climatic event has reduced the United States to ash. The novel's spare prose and refusal of explanation, as Stephanie LeMenager has argued, performs the affective texture of ecological grief rather than its diagnosis (LeMenager,2014).

### 4.2. The Speculative-Systemic Mode

Kim Stanley Robinson's body of work constitutes the most sustained literary attempt to think climate change as a systems problem. From the Science in the Capital trilogy (2004–2007), through 2312 (2012), New York 2140 (2017), and the recent The Ministry for the Future (2020), Robinson has insisted that the climate novel must engage policy, finance, and political economy with the same seriousness as character. The Ministry for the Future is structurally encyclopedic: it includes chapters narrated by carbon atoms, by central bankers, by photons. Robinson's wager, articulated in interviews and in the novels themselves, is that utopia and dystopia are not opposites but neighbours, and that the work of climate fiction is to render the corridor between them politically thinkable (Robinson,2017; Canavan, 2017).

### 4.3. The Realist-Affective Mode

Barbara Kingsolver's Flight Behavior (2012) follows Dellarobia Turnbow, a young Appalachian mother who discovers a population of monarch butterflies overwintering anomalously, catastrophically in the mountains of Tennessee. The novel models how climate change enters local life not as global catastrophe but as small, uncanny disturbance. Jenny Offill's Weather (2020) compresses the affective texture of climate anxiety into a fragmentary, aphoristic narrative voice. These works are realist in conventional formal terms; their innovation is in the affective register through which climate is registered. As Adeline Johns-Putra observes, the realist climate novel often takes the form of a domestic drama refracted through ecological anxiety (Johns-Putra,2019).

### 4.4. The Multispecies-Ecological Mode

Richard Powers's The Overstory (2018), winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, is paradigmatic of a recent turn toward what might be called multispecies climate fiction. Powers's interweaving of nine human protagonists with the lives of trees and his formal decision to grant trees temporal and ethical priority has been widely read as an attempt to displace anthropocentric narrative convention (Marland,2013). Jeff VanderMeer's Annihilation (2014) and the broader Southern Reach trilogy use the affective resources of the New Weird to figure ecological transformation as something that exceeds human comprehension entirely. Octavia Butler's Parable of the Sower (1993) and Parable of the Talents (1998), although predating the consolidation of the cli-fi label, anticipate this mode in their attentiveness to the entanglement of climate, race, religion, and survival (Streeby,2018).

## V. POSTCOLONIAL AND GLOBAL SOUTH COUNTER-ARCHIVES

To survey climate fiction primarily through Anglophone, North Atlantic texts is to risk reproducing the very planetary inequalities the genre claims to address. As Rob Nixon argues in Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor (2011), the temporality of climate damage dispersed, gradual, attritional has historically been most visible to those who live closest to the extractive frontier. Nixon's concept of slow violence names harms that are 'incremental and accretive' yet structurally invisible to the spectacle-driven attention economies of the Global North (Nixon,2011). This violence is not less narratable; it requires a different narrative form.

Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide (2004) and Gun Island (2019) exemplify the Global South climate novel that Ghosh's own theoretical work calls for. Set in the Sundarbans of Bengal, these novels braid hydrological precarity, postcolonial dispossession, and migratory crisis into a narrative that treats the human–nonhuman boundary as politically constructed. The dolphin Orcaella in The Hungry Tide and the snakes and spiders of Gun Island are not symbols but actors. Helon Habila's Oil on Water (2010) returns to the Niger Delta, the petro-violence of which is, as Byron Caminero-Santangelo observes, simultaneously local and planetary a node where the carbon economy that will warm the planet is materially produced (Caminero-Santangelo,2015).

Indra Sinha's Animal's People (2007), based on the aftermath of the Bhopal gas leak, narrates toxic embodiment from the perspective of 'Animal,' a young man whose spine has been deformed by the disaster. Although usually classified as toxic-discourse fiction rather than climate fiction proper, the novel has been increasingly read alongside climate texts

because of its insistence that environmental catastrophe is never natural: it is always racialised, classed, and geopolitically distributed (Mukherjee,2010). To this archive one might add the Caribbean climate fiction of Karen Lord and Nalo Hopkinson, the Latin American eco-fiction tradition exemplified by Jorge Volpi and Samanta Schweblin's Distancia de rescate (Fever Dream, 2014), and the Pacific Anglophone work of Witi Ihimaera and the late poet Teresia Teaiwa, all of which insist on the priority of the colonised perspective in any account of planetary harm.

This counter-archive does more than diversify the syllabus. It names a methodological problem internal to climate fiction studies. As Yusoff and others have argued, the Anthropocene narrative that places the climate crisis at the centre of a shared human predicament risks obscuring the differential responsibilities and vulnerabilities that constitute it (Yusoff,2018). Postcolonial climate fiction insists, formally and thematically, on a plural Anthropocene or, in Donna Haraway's preferred formulation, on the entangled stories of the Capitalocene, the Plantationocene, and the Chthulucene (Haraway 2016; Moore 2016).

## VI. HOW CLIMATE FICTION PERFORMS ACTIVISM: FOUR MECHANISMS

If climate fiction is a mode of literary activism, it is reasonable to ask: by what mechanisms? Drawing on cognitive narratology, ecocritical theory, and the small but growing body of empirical reception research, four mechanisms can be distinguished.

### 6.1. Cognitive Scaling

Climate change is, in Timothy Morton's influential coinage, a hyperobject: an entity so massively distributed in time and space that it resists direct perceptual grasp (Morton,2013). Narrative is one of the few cultural technologies capable of making such objects partially thinkable. Robinson's Ministry for the Future opens with a heat dome over Uttar Pradesh that kills twenty million people in a week; the chapter operates as a cognitive prosthesis, allowing readers to register a magnitude that climate communications routinely fail to convey. Similar effects are visible in Atwood's biotech extrapolations and in Powers's arboreal time-scales. Climate fiction, on this view, performs activism not by argument but by enabling perception.

### 6.2. Affective Rehearsal

Climate emotions grief, anxiety, anticipatory mourning, what the philosopher Glenn Albrecht has named solastalgia are increasingly recognised as both psychologically significant and politically consequential (Albrecht ,2005). Climate fiction provides a low-stakes environment in which these affects can be rehearsed, named, and shared. Empirical work by Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, surveying readers of nineteen climate novels, found that the dominant emotional response was not despair but a complex mixture of concern, sadness, and a heightened sense that climate change is real and proximate (Schneider-Mayerson ,2018). The activist value of such affect lies less in any direct behavioural consequence than in the cultural normalisation of climate concern a precondition, on Heise's account, for sustained political mobilisation (Heise, 2016).

### 6.3. Ethical Extension

Drawing on Martha Nussbaum's argument that literary reading cultivates a 'narrative imagination' capable of ethical extension to others, several critics have argued that climate fiction extends moral consideration beyond the human (Nussbaum 1997; Garrard,2012). Powers's trees, VanderMeer's strange ecosystems, Ghosh's dolphins are not anthropomorphic projections but invitations to recognise nonhuman agency. As Lawrence Buell has long argued, the imagination of place itself is a politically formative act; what is true of place is also true of biotic kin (Buell 2005). Whether such ethical extension translates into political behaviour remains empirically contested, but the cultural shift in moral horizon is documentable.

### 6.4. Counter-Discursive Imagining

Perhaps most importantly, climate fiction supplies counter-narratives to the dominant cultural scripts that frame climate change as either insoluble or already-solved. The genre's utopian wing exemplified by Robinson's later work, Becky Chambers's Monk and Robot novellas (2021–2022), and the broader solarpunk movement models forms of post-carbon flourishing that policy discourse rarely permits itself to articulate (Williams,2019). Conversely, the dystopian wing punctures the technocratic complacency that imagines climate as a problem of incremental adjustment. Together, these counter-discourses expand what the political theorist Sheldon Wolin has called the 'horizon of the politically thinkable.' Climate fiction's activist work is, on this view, principally infrastructural: it furnishes the imaginative materials with which political possibility is built.

## VII. CRITIQUES AND LIMITATIONS

The case for climate fiction as literary activism has not gone uncontested. Three critiques deserve serious engagement.

The first concerns empirical evidence. Schneider-Mayerson's own work, while broadly affirming the affective and cognitive effects of climate fiction, finds little evidence that reading climate novels produces measurable changes in behaviour or political activity (Schneider-Mayerson,2018). Reader surveys consistently show that climate fiction is read overwhelmingly by readers already concerned about climate change what communications researchers call the preaching-

to-the-choir problem. If literary activism is judged by its capacity to convert the unconverted, climate fiction's record is at best ambiguous.

The second critique, articulated forcefully by Timothy Clark, concerns scale failure. Clark argues that even the most ambitious climate novels tend to domesticate planetary processes by translating them into the conventional grammar of character, plot, and resolution. The result is what he calls a 'scale framing crisis': novels that gesture at planetary catastrophe while remaining aesthetically consoling (Clark,2015). Adam Trexler concedes a related point when he notes that the formal challenge of representing climate change has not been solved so much as repeatedly attempted (Trexler,2015).

The third critique, raised by Yusoff, the postcolonial ecocritic Elizabeth DeLoughrey, and others, concerns commodification and representational politics. As cli-fi consolidates as a marketable category, it risks reproducing the publishing industry's existing inequities privileging Anglophone, North Atlantic, and individualist narratives at the expense of collective, oral, and minoritarian forms (DeLoughrey,2019; Yusoff,2018). The proliferation of climate-themed thrillers and dystopian young-adult novels, while expanding the audience for climate concern, may simultaneously aestheticise catastrophe in ways that serve consumption rather than action.

These critiques do not invalidate the case for climate fiction as activism, but they refine it. Climate fiction is most defensible not as a vehicle for individual conversion but as a participant in a wider cultural ecology of meaning-making one that includes journalism, science communication, social movements, and the visual arts. Its activist function is contributory, not causal.

## VIII. EMERGENT FORMS: SOLARPUNK, INDIGENOUS FUTURISMS, YOUNG-ADULT CLI-FI

Three emergent currents within and adjacent to climate fiction merit specific attention. The first is solarpunk, an aesthetic and literary movement that consciously refuses the dystopian default of climate writing. Solarpunk anthologies such as Sunvault (2017) and Becky Chambers's recent novellas imagine post-carbon worlds organised around solar energy, mutual aid, and ecological repair (Williams ,2019). Critics have noted that solarpunk's utopianism is not naïve but strategic: it recognises, with the cultural theorist Fredric Jameson, that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, and chooses to imagine the latter anyway (Jameson 2005).

The second is Indigenous climate fiction and Indigenous futurisms more broadly. Writers including Cherie Dimaline (The Marrow Thieves, 2017), Rebecca Roanhorse, Daniel H. Wilson, and Waubgeshig Rice (Moon of the Crusted Snow, 2018) reframe climate apocalypse from Indigenous perspectives for whom apocalypse is not a future event but a colonial past that has been survived. The Anishinaabe scholar Grace Dillon, who coined the term Indigenous futurisms, observes that 'Native Apocalypse' fiction repositions the climate crisis as one episode in a longer history of ecological dispossession (Dillon,2012). The Potawatomi scholar Kyle Whyte's argument that Indigenous peoples 'are already living in what their ancestors would have understood as a dystopia' transforms the temporality of climate fiction itself (Whyte,2018).

The third is young-adult climate fiction, which has grown rapidly since the mid-2010s. Texts such as Saci Lloyd's The Carbon Diaries 2015 (2008), Paolo Bacigalupi's Ship Breaker (2010), Cherie Dimaline's The Marrow Thieves, and Kim Stanley Robinson's adolescent-oriented entries combine dystopian world-building with the developmental questions characteristic of YA writing. Empirical work by Schneider-Mayerson and others suggests that young readers, perhaps because they are still forming political identity, are particularly susceptible to the cognitive and affective effects documented in adult readers (Schneider-Mayerson ,2018; Curry ,2013). The intergenerational dynamic of YA climate fiction its frequent figuration of a younger generation that must repair the harms of an older one aligns with the political aesthetics of the youth climate movement that crystallised around Greta Thunberg's school strikes from 2018 onward.

## IX. CONCLUSION: READING AT THE EDGE OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

The twenty-first century is unlikely to be remembered for the success of its climate policies. Whether it is remembered as the moment in which an inadequate political response was nevertheless culturally articulated the moment at which a planetary public learned, however belatedly, to name what was happening to it remains an open question. Climate fiction will be among the answers.

This article has argued that climate fiction is best understood as a mode rather than a genre; that its activist work is infrastructural rather than persuasive; and that its critical evaluation must be both more empirical and more attentive to the colonial and racial constitution of the Anthropocene than much existing scholarship has been. Cli-fi cannot, by itself, decarbonise economies, depose petro-states, or refigure the international architecture of climate justice. It can, however, supply the metaphors, scenarios, and structures of feeling without which such projects cannot be politically articulated. As Ghosh insists at the close of The Great Derangement, the imagination is not ornamental to the climate response; it is constitutive of it (Ghosh,2019).

To read climate fiction in 2026 is therefore to participate in a small but consequential act of cultural maintenance: keeping alive the capacity to imagine that the world might still be otherwise. Whether the political will exists to act on those imaginings is, of course, the question that fiction cannot finally answer. But to refuse the imaginative labour is to foreclose, in advance, the very possibilities that political action depends upon. In that minimal but irreducible sense, climate fiction is, indeed, literary activism and the Anthropocene is, among other things, an interpretive challenge that the humanities cannot decline.

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