

## **Climate Fiction (Cli-Fi) and the Ecological Imaginary: Narrating Environmental Crisis in Twenty-First Century Literature**

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### **Abstract:**

Somewhere in the past two decades, the novel stopped treating climate change as someone else's problem. It moved in — into plots, into character psychology, into questions about what a story can honestly end with. This paper tries to account for that shift and to take seriously what it means. Drawing on ecocritical theory, postcolonial scholarship, and the contested concept of the Anthropocene, it traces how climate fiction emerged as a recognisable literary mode and asks what work it is actually doing — particularly how it shapes what critics call the ecological imaginary, that background cultural sediment of stories, metaphors, and unreflective assumptions through which societies make sense of their relationship to the nonhuman world. My argument is that the genre matters most not for its subject matter but for what that subject matter has forced writers to do: find ways of holding temporal scales the novel was never designed for, root fiction in specific places that are disappearing, and develop an emotional vocabulary for a grief with no real precedent. I also sit with the tensions running through the genre — whether catastrophe fiction leaves readers inert or motivated, and whose experiences of climate change end up at the centre of the work that gets read and praised.

**Keywords:** climate fiction, Cli-Fi, ecocriticism, ecological imaginary, Anthropocene

### **Introduction**

The novel has changed. That is not a claim one makes lightly — literary critics have been announcing transformations in the form for as long as the form has existed, and most of those announcements turn out, on reflection, to be overstated. But something has genuinely shifted in literary fiction over the past twenty years,

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something that resists being explained away as trend or fashion. Climate change has moved from the margins of serious imaginative writing toward something like its centre, and in doing so it has altered not just what novels are about but how they work. It drives plots now. It determines where characters can go and what they can reasonably want. In the more formally ambitious work of the period, it shapes the conditions under which narrative itself becomes possible — what can plausibly begin, what can resolve, what kind of future any story is permitted to imagine.

Writing well about climate change is, in a sense, as much the subject of this paper as climate fiction itself. Narrative — in the tradition running from Aristotle through to contemporary craft writing — depends on a particular relationship with time: events oriented toward something, causes yielding consequences, a felt momentum that what comes next is not simply arbitrary. Climate change resists this almost everywhere you press it. It doesn't arrive with dramatic legibility. It accumulates, disperses, falls with radical unevenness across geography and social position — more destructive in the Maldives than in Minnesota, more immediately devastating for communities that can't absorb or adapt to what is already under way. It has no single antagonist, no decisive crisis moment that a plot can build toward. Getting it into narrative form is not a neutral aesthetic exercise. A culture that lacks adequate forms for imagining a crisis is a culture with a diminished capacity to respond to it, and that diminishment is political in its reach.

The label 'climate fiction' has been in circulation since the early 2000s, pushed initially by the journalist Dan Bloom, and took some years to find a foothold in academic literary study. The intellectual groundwork had been laid earlier, in the broader field of ecocriticism, which since the 1990s had been arguing that literary culture does not simply reflect existing attitudes toward the natural world but actively participates in forming them. Ghosh, in *The Great Derangement*, gave that argument a formulation that has stuck: the stories a society tells about nature are inseparable from the decisions it makes about it (11). That's where this paper starts. What follows moves from theoretical context through questions of form and political consequence — an attempt to say what Cli-Fi is actually doing, and why that doing matters.

### **Ecocriticism and the Theoretical Foundations of Cli-Fi**

Ecocriticism didn't arrive out of nowhere. By the 1980s and into the 1990s, a growing body of literary scholars were uncomfortable with how successfully their

discipline had managed to ignore one of the most pressing features of the world it was ostensibly studying: that the world was in environmental crisis, and that the stories literary culture had been telling bore some relation to the attitudes that produced it. The field drew on deep ecology, environmental philosophy, and eventually postcolonial theory, building a critical vocabulary for asking how texts represent, legitimate, or challenge human relationships with the nonhuman world. Glotfelty and Fromm gave it much of its early institutional shape in their 1996 anthology; their framing of the field's guiding concern as "the connections between literature and the physical environment" (xix) was deliberately open, and that openness proved to be the right call.

What proved less right was the first wave's narrowness of scope, something later scholars have been fairly candid about. Wilderness got romanticised. A fairly restricted body of Anglo-American texts — pastoral, frontier-preoccupied, centred on the encounter between solitary consciousness and unspoilt landscape — got treated as though it were representative of environmental writing in general. Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* stands as the signal case: genuinely important, seriously learned, and yet operating as though race, class, gender, and colonial history were more or less orthogonal to the human-nature relationship. A field that had set out to interrogate anthropocentrism ended up replicating, in a quieter key, some of the exclusions it might have been expected to challenge.

The second wave, which gathered pace through the 2000s while Cli-Fi was consolidating as a genre, was considerably more alert to all of this. Environmental justice moved from marginal concern to genuine preoccupation. Postcolonial frameworks started being applied in ways that made visible how environmental harm follows existing lines of racial and economic inequality. The Anthropocene — the designation Crutzen and Stoermer put into circulation in 2000 for the geological epoch in which human activity has become a primary planetary force (17) — gave climate fiction scholarship a powerful, if contested, organising concept. Why it matters for literary study is that it dissolves the old partition between the human and the natural: if there is no nature that stands cleanly apart from culture, if geology and human history have become irreversibly entangled, then fiction's traditional orientation around human interiority can no longer pretend to be sealed off from the forces that materially determine the conditions of social life. Clark has pressed this

into the domain of formal literary criticism with some rigour — arguing that thinking at the scales climate change requires puts pressure on literary convention in ways criticism has barely begun to work through (72).

### **Constructing the Ecological Imaginary**

What ecocritics mean by the ecological imaginary is harder to pin down than the phrase suggests, and I think that difficulty is actually part of the point. It's not a set of opinions about the environment — opinions can be corrected, updated, argued with. It's something more like the substrate beneath opinions: the inherited metaphors nobody chose, the taken-for-granted stories about what nature is and what human beings owe it or can extract from it, the unreflective sense of which futures feel possible and which feel like fantasy. All of this shapes what gets noticed and what stays invisible, which risks feel real and which don't — and it operates largely without announcing itself. You can't debate your way into changing it. That's precisely why scientific publications and policy documents, however carefully evidenced, tend to leave it untouched. Fiction is one of the few things that actually works on this level, and that's not a small claim.

Part of what fiction does — and this is something I keep returning to when I read arguments about climate communication — is locate the crisis in a body. A specific body, in a specific place, at a moment with enough emotional weight that the reader can't hold it at arm's length and process it purely as information. Trexler's survey of the genre makes the case that the novel's real achievement is creating characters who actually inhabit a world where climate change carries material consequences (6) — not a concept held at analytical distance but a force that closes off futures those characters had reason to expect, erodes what they relied on, makes certain choices simply unavailable. I'd frame it slightly differently: there are forms of understanding about what it means to lose a coastline, or to watch a season you've known your entire life quietly contract, that you simply can't reach through data or argument alone. Only through inhabiting, even fictionally, what that loss feels like from the inside.

Then there's the time problem, which I think gets systematically underestimated in discussions of climate communication. Human attention evolved for immediate, perceptible threats — danger that announces itself in ways you can actually see and respond to. Climate change operates on timescales that dwarf

individual biography. The daily news cycle structurally can't hold it: news is built around novelty and interruption, and a crisis that builds slowly and unevenly across decades keeps sliding out of the frame before it fully arrives. What a novel can do is something genuinely different — move across a century inside a paragraph, let geological deep time and the span of a single human life press against each other in the same scene, make a reader feel several accumulated decades in the course of a single afternoon. Whether that constitutes a kind of knowing distinct from what journalism or policy writing produces is a question I'd want to press carefully, but the difference in what becomes emotionally accessible is real enough to matter.

Something that doesn't get discussed enough is what I'd call the rehearsal function. Speculative climate fiction — novels and stories set inside futures that catastrophe has already shaped — lets readers inhabit scenarios that haven't quite arrived yet. Test their own intuitions about solidarity and sacrifice and what community actually means when resources are scarce, before any of that is demanded of them in earnest. People sometimes call this escapism, which misses what's happening. Escapism takes you somewhere that asks nothing of you. Speculative climate fiction puts you somewhere genuinely uncomfortable and requires you to work out how you'd act in it. Whether that amounts to ethical preparation in any robust sense is a harder question — I'm genuinely uncertain — but it's doing something that purely informational accounts of climate futures don't.

### **Thematic and Formal Strategies**

The formal challenges of climate fiction aren't separate from its thematic ones. They're the same problem viewed from a different angle, and the distinction matters because the most revealing failures in the genre are those where technique gets subordinated to the desire to deliver information — where fiction becomes, in effect, a lecture on environmental politics wearing the costume of narrative. The writers who avoid this understand, however instinctively, that the formal and the substantive are inseparable: you cannot write honestly about the scale and texture of climate change inside inherited narrative structures that were built for a world organised differently.

Time is where the difficulty is sharpest. Conventional narrative runs on momentum the expectation that events move purposefully toward something, that cause will eventually yield consequence. Climate change is characterised by what

Nixon called slow violence: harm that “occurs gradually and out of sight,” dispersed across time and space in ways that constitute “a violence of delayed destruction” (2). Rendering that inside a form whose conventions require forward drive produces a structural tension that has no clean resolution. The range of strategies writers have developed is genuinely interesting to track: multiple interlocking timelines that bring different historical moments into unexpected proximity; archival or documentary material let into the text to speak in its own register; narratives set in climate-altered futures that work backward, forensically, through the decisions and failures of the present. None of these is seamless. At its worst, the genre produces novels that read as extended position papers. But the most powerful passages in this body of work tend to arrive when the layering of timescales does something the writer couldn't quite plan: a character finds her private grief inscribed in geological processes that preceded her by millions of years, and that those same processes are the legible trace of countless accumulated human decisions.

Place is the other major preoccupation — and in some ways the more emotionally direct one, because grief works through particularity rather than generalisation. The Cli-Fi that actually stays with readers is almost always specific. Not “a coastal city” but a named bay with a recorded history; not “a neighbourhood” but a particular street whose buildings exist on a map you can pull up. This specificity isn't just realist technique. It's a moral stance. Climate fiction that holds to the named and located resists the drift — common in scientific communication and policy discourse alike — toward framing environmental loss as a statistical or systemic matter rather than something happening to actual people in actual places that have accumulated human meaning across time.

Glenn Albrecht's concept of solastalgia is worth dwelling on here. It names a very specific kind of distress: the grief caused by environmental change in the landscape you still inhabit. Not nostalgia — which is longing for somewhere you've left — but something experienced in place, while you're still living inside the landscape that is transforming. Watching the familiar turn strange. Finding that the world you've oriented yourself by has been made alien by forces you can't meaningfully resist and had no real hand in producing. Climate fiction has had to develop new emotional registers to hold this, partly because the experience itself is historically new and has no adequate literary precedent. Writers have been reaching

for narrative voices that won't look away, prose rhythms that carry the texture of slow deterioration, structures that hold attachment and anticipatory loss together without resolving either.

### **The Politics of Hope and Despair**

The question of what Cli-Fi does to readers politically has been running since the genre had critics, and it hasn't settled — probably because it can't be settled at the level of genre, depending as it does on the specific qualities of specific works. But it's a question I'm not willing to sidestep, because the stakes are real. If fiction that represents climate catastrophe with genuine honesty produces something closer to paralysis than motivation, then however good it is as literature, it may be working against itself as culture. This is a version of a question that has dogged political art since at least the Frankfurt School arguments: does representing suffering mobilise resistance to it, or does it breed what Sontag called compassion fatigue — an emotional exhaustion that ends up, in practice, functioning more like resignation than engagement?

The critics I find most useful here have resisted any general answer, and I think they're right to. Climate fiction that dwells in collapse, that renders catastrophe with aesthetic intensity but without any purchase for human agency, risks producing something I'd call pleasurable despair — a fatalism that carries its own comfort, because giving up removes the burden of obligation. That comfort is real, and it can be mistaken for honesty. Some well-regarded Cli-Fi has been charged with providing exactly this experience while wearing the prestige of unflinching realism, and the charge isn't entirely unfair.

The novels that seem to me to justify the genre's ambitions are those that refuse this without reaching for a false optimism that would be its own kind of lie. They don't soften what's already being lost. But they won't present what comes next as settled. Johns-Putra articulates what's at stake here: the Cli-Fi that matters most holds open the sense that choices made now — by people, by communities, by political formations — will produce genuinely different outcomes depending on what those choices are (5). Sustaining that requires something like a double acknowledgement: that the gravity of what is already in motion is real, and that action in the face of it is still meaningful. Neither the consolation of optimism nor the

consolation of despair. Maintaining the space between them without tipping one way or the other is, I'd argue, the hardest thing this genre asks of its writers.

There's a further political dimension that I think gets less attention than it deserves. Climate change doesn't distribute its damage evenly. The communities bearing the most severe effects are predominantly those least responsible for producing the crisis: Indigenous peoples whose relationships to land and water are under direct threat; rural communities in the Global South whose agricultural systems are being destabilised; low-income urban populations in coastal and heat-exposed areas who lack the resources to relocate or adapt. The Cli-Fi that has attracted the most critical and commercial attention in Anglophone literary culture has not reliably reflected this. When the genre centres the anxieties of affluent, mobile, predominantly white protagonists mourning the loss of a world that disproportionately served them, it doesn't just fail to represent the crisis accurately — it reproduces the structural asymmetries that make the crisis so unjust. Work that carries genuine political weight is work that holds on to the specific, unequal shape of what is happening, and declines the retreat into a universalism that quietly erases who's been most harmed, by whom, and for whose benefit.

### **Conclusion**

I want to resist the kind of conclusion that recapitulates the argument and closes on a note of measured uplift. It seems the wrong form for a paper about a genre that is itself trying to find better endings than the ones currently available. So I'll try to say something more plainly.

Climate fiction is doing work that matters. Not because it offers solutions — it doesn't, and the writers worth reading are honest about that — but because it makes the crisis imaginatively inhabitable in ways that other modes of engagement can't quite manage. It has pushed the resources of fiction toward temporal and spatial scales that the novel wasn't originally designed for. It has kept questions of justice and representation alive at a moment when public discourse tends to treat the crisis as everyone's problem equally — which, as I've argued, it isn't. And it has done all of this while the scientific evidence keeps accumulating and the political response keeps falling short of what that evidence would seem to demand.

The underlying argument of this paper is that how a society imagines its relationship to the nonhuman world is not separable from how it acts toward it. The ecological imaginary — that background infrastructure of stories and metaphors and unreflective assumptions — determines what feels possible, what a society is willing to grieve, what it's prepared to fight for. Climate fiction is doing active work on that imaginary, novel by novel, without any guarantee of effect. A novel doesn't sequester carbon. It doesn't produce policy change at the scale the moment demands. What it does is refuse — and this refusal isn't trivial — to let the assumption settle that the future is already determined. It holds open what is being lost and insists on the genuine openness of what comes after. In a crisis whose defining tendency is the progressive narrowing of what seems possible, that insistence is worth quite a lot.

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