



Narrating the Anthropocene: Scale, Agency, and Form in Climate Fiction

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Abstract

This essay argues that climate fiction's distinctive achievement lies not in its capacity to make environmental catastrophe visible but in its formal reorganization around the very impossibility of doing so. Building on now-familiar diagnoses of a crisis of the literary imagination, the theory of hyperobjects, the collapse of human and natural history into a single timeline, and the concept of slow violence, the discussion identifies the genre's central problem as one of scalar disjuncture: the incommensurability between human-sized narration and planetary-scale process. Rather than resolving this disjuncture by abandoning realism for myth or science fiction, the most ambitious climate novels turn the gap itself into form. Through readings of six representative contemporary works, the essay traces three formal strategies by which fiction redistributes narrative agency away from the bounded individual protagonist toward nonhuman, collective, and distributed actants. Climate fiction, it concludes, contributes less a content than a poetics: a way of writing the Anthropocene as the structuring absence around which narrative must reassemble itself. Its realism is not betrayed but mutated, expanded to register forces that exceed the frame of the bourgeois life.

Keywords:- Climate Fiction, Anthropocene, Ecocriticism, Hyperobjects, Narrative Scale, Slow Violence, Nonhuman Agency, Realism, Environmental Humanities

Introduction

The Anthropocene names a paradox that literature is peculiarly ill-equipped to narrate. To say that humanity has become a geological force, as Dipesh Chakrabarty argues in his influential theses on the climate of history, is to assert an agency so collective, so diffuse across centuries and continents, that it dissolves precisely the unit through which the modern novel has organized meaning: the individual life, lived at human scale, in a recognizable place and a measurable span of time. The crisis of climate is therefore also, and inescapably, a crisis of form. When Amitav Ghosh observes that the climate emergency is "also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination," he is registering a failure that is at once aesthetic and epistemological (Ghosh, *Great Derangement* 9). The forces that now determine the fate of the species are not available to the senses; they unfold on timescales that mock the rhythms of plot; they implicate

everyone and no one. How does a genre devoted to the texture of particular experience represent a phenomenon defined by its escape from particularity?

Climate fiction, or "cli-fi," is the name now attached to the body of contemporary writing that has taken up this challenge. The label is loose, gathering literary realism, speculative dystopia, the New Weird, and the documentary epic under a single thematic umbrella. This essay's wager is that the genre's importance is misunderstood when it is measured by its referential success, by how vividly it depicts melting ice or future drought. Cli-fi's genuine contribution is formal. Its most searching works do not overcome the representational impasse that Ghosh diagnoses; they make that impasse legible, building narrative architectures around the gap between the human scale at which stories are told and the planetary scale at which the Anthropocene operates. I call this organizing principle a poetics of scalar disjuncture. Where Ghosh implies that serious fiction has failed the climate, I argue that the most interesting response has not been a retreat from the novel but a mutation of it: a redistribution of narrative agency away from the bounded protagonist toward nonhuman, collective, and distributed actants. The following sections trace this argument through the theoretical problem of scale, Ghosh's diagnosis and its limits, and three formal strategies by which contemporary fiction reconstitutes itself around the catastrophe it cannot directly show.

The Problem of Scale: Hyperobjects and the Human-Sized Story

The first obstacle the Anthropocene poses to narrative is one of magnitude. Timothy Morton's concept of the hyperobject captures the difficulty with unusual precision. Hyperobjects are entities "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans": global warming, the biosphere, the sum of all plutonium are things so vast that we never encounter them directly but only ever apprehend their local manifestations (Morton 1). A heat wave is not climate change; it is a sample of a process whose true dimensions exceed perception. For Morton, hyperobjects are "viscous," adhering to everything we do, and "nonlocal," such that their effects appear in places remote from any visible cause. The consequence for representation is severe. If the object itself can never be brought into the frame, then any narrative that attempts to depict it can only ever gesture toward a totality it cannot contain. The hyperobject is, by definition, that which withdraws from the scene of its own representation.

Chakrabarty sharpens the temporal dimension of this problem. His argument that anthropogenic climate change collapses the long-assumed distinction between human history and natural history carries a destabilizing corollary: the protagonist of climate is not any person or even any nation but the species, "humanity" as a geological agent, a category that cannot be the subject of experience and therefore cannot, in the conventional sense, be the subject of a story (Chakrabarty). One cannot narrate the species from within; there is no vantage, no consciousness, adequate to it. Rob Nixon adds a decisive insight about tempo. Environmental catastrophe is rarely the spectacular event that narrative craves; it is rather what he calls "slow violence," "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2). Slow violence resists storytelling because it lacks the explosive, image-ready moment around which dramatic form coheres. Its victims are dispersed, its agents abstracted, its timeline measured in decades.

Taken together, Morton, Chakrabarty, and Nixon describe a single predicament from three angles: spatial vastness, agential dispersal, and temporal attrition. Each names a way in which the Anthropocene exceeds the dimensions of the human-sized story. Yet ecocriticism has long insisted that the literary imagination is not merely a passive victim of this mismatch but an active instrument for renegotiating it. Lawrence Buell's account of environmental criticism distinguishes a first wave preoccupied with the preservation of nature and place from a second wave attentive to environmental justice and the entanglement of the natural with the social

(Buell). Ursula Heise pushes the spatial argument further still, contending that an ethics adequate to the planet requires what she terms "eco-cosmopolitanism," an imaginative reach beyond the localism of place toward a "sense of planet" capable of grasping global ecological interdependence (Heise 10). Greg Garrard, surveying the tropes through which environmental writing has historically worked, identifies apocalypse as the master trope of ecological rhetoric, a frame that lends urgency but also risks the numbing fatalism and deferred catastrophe that drain political agency (Garrard). These critical positions converge on a productive tension. The challenge is not simply to depict the planet but to find forms that hold local experience and planetary process in the same frame without collapsing one into the other, precisely the disjuncture that cli-fi must learn to inhabit.

Ghosh's Great Derangement and the Crisis of Realism

No single text has shaped the critical conversation around climate fiction more decisively than Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement*. Its central provocation is a literary-historical claim: that the modern novel, and particularly the tradition of bourgeois realism, is constitutively incapable of representing climate change. Ghosh argues that the novel achieved its characteristic effects by banishing the improbable, by domesticating event into the smooth regularity of ordinary middle-class existence (Ghosh, *Great Derangement*). The "serious" novel learned to distrust coincidence, catastrophe, and the uncanny, relegating them to genres deemed minor: gothic, fantasy, and science fiction. But climate change is nothing if not improbable in this sense: it confronts us with freakish weather, with the sudden irruption of nonhuman force into human affairs, with events that the calibrated probabilities of realist fiction were designed to exclude. The result, Ghosh contends, is a derangement: a culture whose dominant narrative form cannot think the very crisis that most threatens it. That climate fiction has been shunted into the speculative ghetto is, on this reading, a symptom of the disease.

Ghosh's diagnosis is indispensable, but it is also partial, and its limits are instructive. The claim that realism per se is incapable of registering catastrophe rests on a narrowed conception of the realist tradition, one that downplays the long lineage of novels concerned with famine, plague, war, and ecological ruin. Adam Trexler's survey of several hundred Anthropocene novels demonstrates that fiction has in fact been metabolizing climate for decades, and that the work of representation has proceeded less by abandoning the novel than by stretching its conventions, reorganizing setting, plot, and character to accommodate forces that older fiction left in the background (Trexler). Trexler's archive suggests that Ghosh's diagnosis is in danger of becoming self-fulfilling: by defining the problem as the failure of realism, it risks overlooking the formal experiments through which realism has been adapting all along. The more compelling question is not whether the novel can represent climate but how it must change to do so.

Ghosh's own fiction supplies a revealing answer. *Gun Island*, published three years after *The Great Derangement*, reads as a deliberate test of his theoretical claims. The novel follows Deen, a Brooklyn-based dealer in rare books, whose pursuit of a Bengali legend draws him from the drowning Sundarbans to a Venice imperiled by acqua alta, along routes traced by climate refugees and by species migrating in response to a warming world. Ghosh's method here is precisely the rehabilitation of the improbable that his criticism called for. Uncanny coincidence, prophetic myth, and the eruption of the nonhuman (spiders, snakes, dolphins, wildfire) are not embarrassments to be explained away but the very grammar through which the planetary is made narratable. The novel also enacts a translingual poetics that links etymology to ecological memory: the migration of words across Bengali, Arabic, Italian, and English mirrors the migration of peoples and species, so that language itself becomes a record of connection across borders. This attention to code-switching and linguistic crossing in South Asian Anglophone writing has been read as a structural rather than merely decorative feature

(Ramachandran). Gun Island thus performs the mutation that this essay describes: realism does not collapse but expands, admitting myth and coincidence as instruments for registering a hyperobject that cannot be seen whole (Ghosh, Gun Island). Whether the novel fully succeeds is debatable; its coincidences can feel programmatic, and critics have noted that the machinery of correspondence sometimes strains credulity in the very way Ghosh's criticism warns against. Yet the strain is itself diagnostic. It registers the difficulty of the task, the impossibility of binding a planetary process to a single human itinerary without a measure of artifice, and refuses to disguise that difficulty as polished verisimilitude. As a demonstration that the gap between human and planetary scale can be made into form rather than merely lamented, the novel is exemplary precisely where it is most visibly contrived.

Redistributing Agency: The Nonhuman Protagonist

If the species cannot be a protagonist, one response is to dethrone the protagonist altogether. The most formally radical strand of climate fiction reorganizes narrative attention away from the individuated human consciousness and toward nonhuman agents, distributing the work of agency across a wider field of actants. Richard Powers's *The Overstory* is the signal example. The novel opens with a series of self-contained human histories, each linked to a particular tree, before binding them into a larger pattern. Yet its formal ambition lies in the way it subordinates these human stories to the slower, larger temporality of the forest. Trees, in Powers's rendering, communicate, remember, and act on timescales that dwarf the human; the novel's structure, rooted in sections titled "Roots," "Trunk," "Crown," and "Seeds," mimes arboreal rather than biographical form. Human characters are repeatedly shown to be minor, belated participants in a story whose true protagonist is the forest itself (Powers). *The Overstory* enacts what one might call a deliberate demotion of the human: it uses the realist apparatus of character to stage the inadequacy of character, leading the reader from individual lives toward a perception of distributed, vegetal agency that no single consciousness can hold. The novel's recurrent insistence that the most important events occur on timescales invisible to the human eye, such as the centuries-long life of a chestnut or the slow chemical conversation among roots, amounts to a sustained argument against the anthropocentrism of conventional plot. Even its tragic activist storylines, in which characters sacrifice everything to halt logging, are framed less as heroic individual destinies than as fleeting expressions of a longer ecological will. Here the redistribution of agency is not a theme the novel discusses but the principle that organizes its form.

Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* pursues the same end through opposite means. Where Powers expands the realist novel, VanderMeer estranges it. The first volume of the Southern Reach trilogy sends a nameless expedition, identified only by function (the biologist, the psychologist, the surveyor), into "Area X," a zone in which an unspecified ecological force has rendered the landscape unreadable, contaminating language, identity, and perception. The novel belongs to what has been called the New Weird, and its weirdness is doing precise conceptual work. Area X is a hyperobject given fictional body: a presence that withdraws from every attempt to know it, that turns the instruments of science (measurement, classification, the survey) back on themselves as so much futile mapping. The biologist's narration is a record of comprehension failing in real time. Tellingly, the nonhuman in *Annihilation* is not anthropomorphized into a communicable agent, as Powers's trees risk being; it remains radically other, an agency without intention that nonetheless transforms everything it touches. The novel thereby dramatizes Morton's point that the hyperobject can be registered only through its effects, never grasped as an object. By refusing the consolations of explanation, VanderMeer makes the unreadability of the planetary the structuring principle of his form (VanderMeer). The horror of *Annihilation* is epistemological: it is the horror of a world that exceeds the human capacity to narrate it, and the novel's achievement is to make that excess

felt. Even the prose enacts this withdrawal, as the biologist's clipped, professional idiom dissolves under the pressure of phenomena her vocabulary cannot hold; the language that should master the environment is instead colonized by it. Area X does not threaten the characters so much as unmake the categories through which they would render their experience legible, and the reader is left, like the biologist, with a documentation of incomprehension rather than a revelation.

The two novels mark the poles of a single strategy. Powers extends mimetic realism until it can accommodate the agency of the forest; VanderMeer ruptures realism until its failure becomes the content. Both refuse the premise that a climate-adequate fiction must center a human subject. In doing so they confirm that the genre's formal frontier lies in the redistribution of agency, in writing narratives whose true actants are nonhuman processes, and whose human figures are decentered witnesses to forces they neither command nor comprehend. This is the deepest sense in which cli-fi answers Chakrabarty: unable to narrate the species directly, it narrates the human as one agent among many, embedded in and exceeded by the larger systems it has set in motion.

Temporality, Affect, and the Texture of Slow Violence

The redistribution of agency addresses the problem of scale in space; the problem of scale in time demands a different formal response. Nixon's slow violence is, above all, a crisis of tempo: how does narrative confer significance on a catastrophe that has no climactic moment, that arrives not as event but as gradual erosion? Two novels at opposite ends of the affective spectrum illustrate the available strategies. Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* keeps faith with domestic realism, while Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* opts for the projective, diaristic mode of the near-future dystopia. Read together, they reveal how cli-fi calibrates affect and time to make slow violence perceptible without falsifying it into spectacle.

Flight Behavior stages the encounter between local experience and planetary process with deliberate modesty. Dellarobia Turnbow, a discontented young woman on a struggling Appalachian farm, discovers a valley filled with monarch butterflies whose migration has been catastrophically disrupted by climate change. The novel's power lies in its refusal to leave the human scale: climate is apprehended entirely through the frictions of class, faith, marriage, and rural economy that structure Dellarobia's world. The disrupted migration is beautiful before it is legible as disaster, and the scientist who arrives to study it must contend with a community for whom global warming is an abstraction, a coastal preoccupation, or an affront to faith. Kingsolver's realism thus dramatizes exactly the perceptual gap that Morton theorizes: the hyperobject manifests locally, as an uncanny beauty, while its true dimensions remain invisible to those most immediately affected. The novel's achievement is to render the epistemology of denial from the inside, to show how slow violence is metabolized by ordinary life into something other than violence (Kingsolver). Kingsolver is careful, moreover, to refuse the easy condescension of treating denial as mere ignorance; Dellarobia's skepticism is rooted in the material precarity of a life in which environmental abstraction is a luxury she cannot afford, and the novel locates the obstacle to ecological perception not in stupidity but in the structure of economic vulnerability. Its limitation is the obverse of its strength: bounded by the farm and the season, it can gesture toward the planetary only through the consciousness of characters who cannot themselves perceive it. Yet that very boundedness is a formal choice with critical force, insisting that the planetary becomes real to most people only as it deforms the local textures of work, weather, and belief.

Parable of the Sower confronts the temporal problem by leaping across it. Butler's novel, published in 1993 and set in a 2020s California disintegrating under ecological collapse, economic ruin, and social violence, takes the form of the journal of Lauren Olamina, a young woman afflicted with "hyperempathy" and possessed of a homemade faith, Earthseed, whose

first principle is that "God is Change." The diaristic form is itself a response to slow violence: it accumulates catastrophe incrementally, entry by entry, so that the reader experiences collapse not as a single event but as a grinding, normalized condition, the very attritional quality Nixon describes. Butler refuses the spectacular apocalypse in favor of a managed decline in which water is unaffordable, walled enclaves crumble, and the displaced walk north along the highways. The novel's prescience has made it a touchstone of contemporary cli-fi, but its formal innovation matters more than its accuracy. By embedding catastrophe in the texture of daily survival and binding it to a theology of perpetual change, *Parable* converts the unrepresentable slowness of ecological collapse into a livable, narratable duration (Butler). Earthseed's insistence that change is the only constant is, among other things, an aesthetic proposition: a way of giving narrative shape to a future defined by instability. Where *Kingsolver* holds the present steady and lets climate intrude at its edges, Butler dissolves the stable present altogether, narrating from within the long emergency. Both, however, locate their authority in affect, in dread, grief, and a hard-won, unsentimental hope, because affect is the register in which slow violence first becomes perceptible to those living through it.

Form Against the Future: Documentary Maximalism and Collective Agency

The strategies surveyed so far (the nonhuman protagonist, the recalibration of affective tempo) largely address the problem of representing catastrophe. A final, more recent strand of climate fiction takes up a harder problem: how to narrate not the disaster but the collective response to it, the political and infrastructural labor of mitigation, which is even more resistant to conventional plotting because its agent is no individual but the dispersed apparatus of governments, markets, and movements. Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* is the most ambitious attempt to meet this challenge, and its formal solution is instructive. The novel abandons the unified protagonist almost entirely in favor of a sprawling, polyphonic, documentary maximalism. Across more than a hundred short chapters it interleaves the relatively conventional storylines of Mary Murphy, head of a UN body charged with advocating for future generations, and Frank May, a traumatized survivor of a lethal Indian heat wave, with eyewitness testimonies, meeting minutes, economic explainers, and even riddles narrated from the point of view of a carbon atom, a market, or the sun.

This heterogeneity is not a flaw but the point. Robinson's wager is that the collective agency required to address climate change cannot be represented through any single consciousness, and so the novel disperses narration across the system itself (Robinson). The procedural detail (carbon coins, central bank policy, geoengineering, the legal architecture of the Paris Agreement) performs a kind of realism of institutions, granting the abstractions of climate governance the textural specificity that realism once reserved for domestic interiors. In Garrard's terms, the novel works deliberately against the apocalyptic trope, refusing the seductions of collapse in favor of a difficult, incremental, and frankly utopian account of how catastrophe might be averted (Garrard). Where *Annihilation* makes the hyperobject's unreadability into horror, *Ministry* makes the hyperobject's susceptibility to collective action into a kind of hope, a hope that is procedural rather than redemptive. Its risk is the inverse of the slow-violence novel's: in its determination to narrate the system, it can subordinate character to exposition, the human story to the policy brief. Yet this is arguably the necessary cost of its experiment. Heise's call for a "sense of planet," an imaginative reach adequate to global interdependence, finds in Robinson's polyphony its most thoroughgoing formal realization (Heise). *The Ministry for the Future* demonstrates that the redistribution of narrative agency can extend even to the machinery of governance, and that the planetary can be narrated not only as threat but as a field of collective action. In this respect the novel completes a trajectory the other texts only partly traverse. Powers and VanderMeer decenter the human in favor of nonhuman process; *Kingsolver* and Butler dilate and compress time to make attrition

perceptible; Robinson takes the further step of imagining that the dispersed agency of institutions might itself be narrated, and might act. That his solution sacrifices intimacy for scope is the genre's recurring trade-off in its starkest form. The fragments that compose the book (the eyewitness account, the explainer, the riddle from a nonhuman perspective) do not cohere into a single story so much as they model the impossibility of one, substituting a montage of partial vantages for the totalizing view no narrator could occupy. The reader is asked to synthesize what the form refuses to unify, and that labor of synthesis is precisely the cognitive work the Anthropocene demands of its publics.

Conclusion

The works examined here, Ghosh's *Gun Island*, Powers's *The Overstory*, VanderMeer's *Annihilation*, Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior*, Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, and Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*, are formally heterogeneous to the point of seeming to share little beyond a subject. They span realism and the New Weird, the domestic and the documentary, the elegiac and the utopian. What unites them is not a content but a problem: the scalar disjuncture between the human size of narrative and the planetary size of the Anthropocene. And what makes them significant is that none resolves this disjuncture by pretending to close it. Each instead builds its form around the gap: demoting the human protagonist before the agency of the forest, estranging realism until its failure becomes legible, accumulating slow catastrophe in the texture of a diary, or dispersing narration across an entire political system. The Anthropocene appears in these novels not as an object successfully depicted but as the structuring absence around which narrative must reassemble itself.

This reframing qualifies Ghosh's influential pessimism. The crisis he diagnoses is real, but it is a crisis that the most ambitious climate fiction has converted into a generative formal constraint rather than a sentence of failure. Realism is not abandoned but mutated, expanded to register forces that exceed the frame of the bourgeois life; the improbable is rehabilitated; agency is redistributed beyond the human. The genre's contribution to the environmental humanities is therefore best understood as a poetics, a repertoire of strategies for inhabiting the incommensurability of scales rather than wishing it away. If, as Trexler suggests, the novel has become an essential instrument for making climate tangible, it has done so not by shrinking the planet to human dimensions but by enlarging the novel until it can hold the human and the planetary in the same uneasy frame (Trexler). The measure of climate fiction is not whether it shows us the hyperobject, which it cannot, but whether it teaches us to read the world as one. In learning to narrate the Anthropocene as the limit of narration, cli-fi performs the more difficult and more necessary work: it changes the form of attention itself. That reorientation of attention, from the bounded self to the entangled system, from the spectacular event to the attritional process, from the human protagonist to the more-than-human field, may prove the genre's most durable legacy, long after particular predictions have been confirmed or surpassed by the climate it sought to imagine.

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