The Uninhabitable Earth in the Literary Imagination: Climate Anxiety, Grief, and Justice in Contemporary American Fiction (Review Essay)

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Abstract

In response to Amitav Ghosh's criticism of literature's inaction in responding to the climate crisis, this study addresses a necessary gap by investigating the specific cultural role of contemporary American climate literature. Specifically, it aims to examine how novels such as Richard Powers's The Tangled Forest (2018), Lydia Millet's The Children's Bible (2020), and Omar Akkad's An American War (2017) make the "unimagined" threat of environmental collapse tangible and emotionally impactful. These works are seen as providing a critical language for environmental mourning and the concept of solastalgia, while simultaneously revealing that climate change is a "threat amplifier" that exacerbates existing social injustices such as environmental racism. Furthermore, by employing poignant near-future dystopias, this literature offers a powerful cautionary text, but it goes beyond despair to imagine a post-humanist ethics based on kinship and interconnectedness with the world beyond the human sphere. Accordingly, the study concludes that this narrative genre promotes a vital act of "imaginative restoration," generating the conscious environmental sense necessary to address our planetary crisis, not through direct policy change, but rather through a shift in human consciousness upon which legislation must be based.

Keywords: (literary imagination, grief, justice).

الأرض غير الصالحة للسكن في الخيال الادبي: القلق المناخي، والأسى، والعدالة في الرواية الأمريكية المعاصرة

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الملخص

ردًا على انتقاد أميتاف غوش لتقصير الأدب في الاستجابة لأزمة المناخ، تتناول هذه الدراسة فجوةً ضرورية من خلال دراسة الدور الثقافي المحدد لأدب المناخ الأمريكي المعاصر. وتهدف الدراسة تحديدًا إلى دراسة كيف تجعل روايات مثل "الغابة المتشابكة" لريتشارد باورز (٢٠١٨)، و"إنجيل الأطفال" ليديا ميليت (٢٠٢٠)، و"حرب أمريكية" لعمر العقاد (٢٠١٧) التهديد "غير المُتصوَّر" للانهيار البيئي ملموسًا ومؤثرًا عاطفيًا. تُعتبر هذه الأعمال بمثابة لغة نقدية للحزن البيئي ومفهوم الحنين إلى الماضي، بينما تكشف في الوقت نفسه أن تغير المناخ "مُضخِّم للتهديد" يُفاقم الظلم الاجتماعي القائم، كالعنصرية البيئية. علاوة على ذلك، من خلال توظيفها لقصص ديستوبية مؤثرة عن المستقبل القريب، تُقدم هذه الأدبيات نصًا تحذيريًا قويًا، لكنها تتجاوز اليأس لتتخيل أخلاقيات ما بعد الإنسانية القائمة على القرابة والترابط مع العالم خارج المجال البشري. وبناءً على ذلك، تخلص الدراسة إلى أن هذا النوع السردي يُعزز فعلًا حيويًا من "الاستعادة الخيالية"، مُولِّدًا الحس البيئي الواعي اللازم لمعالجة أزمتنا الكوكبية، ليس من خلال تغيير السياسات مباشرةً، بل من خلال تحول في الوعي الإنساني يجب أن تستند إليه التشريعات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: (الخيال الأدبي، الأسى، العدالة).

Introduction

The climate crisis has been described for decades as a scientific problem: atmospheric parts per million, glacier melt rates, and warming levels. However, as the abstract threat consolidated into a daily reality of extreme wildfires, "100-year" storms that have become annual events, and rising sea levels, its human dimension—psychological, social, and existential—has become unavoidable. In his seminal work, The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable (2018), author and critic Amitav Ghosh made a powerful critique of the literary field. He argued that "serious" literary

fiction, mired in its concern with the individual bourgeois subject, had largely failed to engage with the collective and nonhuman orders of the climate emergency, condemning it to the seemingly unserious realm of science fiction. The crisis was, he claimed, "unthinkable" in our present cultural modes. In the decade-plus since Ghosh's (2018) provocation, however, a powerful wave of contemporary American writing has arisen to respond to this challenge, forging a new literary genre widely known as "climate fiction" or "Cli-Fi."

This new genre is more than a simple collection of disaster stories. A profound artistic and ethical struggle exists in the Anthropocene, our current geologic time period, which is defined by humans' widespread impact on the planet (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2022). Authors like Richard Powers in The Overstory (2018), Lydia Millet in A Children's Bible (2020), and Omar El Akkad in American War (2017) are not merely sounding an alarm; they are chronicling the muddled interior process of witnessing the onset of ecological collapse. Their literature is warning and mourning, articulating a common climate worry and struggling through a profound ecological loss for a world falling apart in real-time. Of greater significance, their fiction goes beyond detailing destruction to examine its disproportionately human consequences, laying bare the brutality of environmental racism and subverting the anthropocentric ideology that culminated in the disaster. This essay will argue that recent American climate fiction plays a crucial cultural function: it makes the unimaginable imaginable. Through their charting of the psychological terrain of ecological grief, their deployment of the convergence of climate emergency and social injustice, and their mapping of dystopian futures and alternative models of interspecies kinship, these novels are constructing an eco-sensitive literary imagination required to navigate—and maybe even to reshape—our relationship with the planet.

Ecological Grief and Psychological Collapse

Before societies can be prepared to mobilize in response to a threat, they must first be able to feel its weight. One important function of twenty-first-century climate fiction is to take climate science's overwhelming, often numbing statistics and render them into felt human feeling. These books are grand histories of what the environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht (2005) termed "solastalgia": the psychic or existential suffering caused by the degradation of one's home environment. It is homesickness without leaving home. Solastalgia and the more general ecological grief are not

specialist conditions but are in the process of becoming the characteristic psychological states of our era, and literature offers the terminology to describe this new organisation of feeling.

Richard Powers' Pulitzer Prize-winning The Overstory (2018) is an epic rumination on this sort of loss, most affectingly embodied in the character of Dr. Patricia Westerford. A shy, genius botanist, Westerford discovers that trees are not isolated beings but interact, cooperate, and live in highly complex social hierarchies. This fictional breakthrough mirrors the real-world scientific discoveries of researchers like Suzanne Simard (Simard, 2021). Her research reveals a crowded, sentient, nonhuman world operating on a scale of much greater magnitude than ours. However, instead of being celebrated, she is mocked by the scientific community and professionally ostracized for her pioneering work. Her rejection indicates humanity's rejection of nature's intrinsic value (Washington et al., 2017). Patricia's life is a long, silent act of mourning, a state of extreme solastalgia for the natural world in which humanity is blind and deaf (Albrecht et al., 2007). She is a Cassandra, with a truth that will not be heard until it is too late. Powers writes, "The visionary is a pathetic thing. The idiot savant is a human tragedy. But the visionary who is not given the institutions to shape his vision is a danger to himself" (Powers, 2018, p. 195). Her final suicide is not one of desperation but a desperate, tragic effort to become part of the living world she so frantically wanted to save, a measure of the unforgivable psychological cost of witnessing ecocide in slow motion (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018).

Lydia Millet's A Children's Bible (2020)does this psychological breakdown differently, in a vicious, intergenerational satire. The novel ensnares a group of wealthy, decadent parents and their starved, hypervigilant kids in a lakeside vacation cabin as an apocalypse storm, recognisably a product of climate change, blows in. The adults face the apocalypse with denial, decadence, and jaw-dropping incompetence. They keep boozing, taking substances, and having pointless trysts, their lifestyle the perfect metaphor for a selfish society's self-delusion in the face of collapse—a form of socially organized denial well-documented in climate sociology (Norgaard, 2011). Marxist critic Mark Fisher (2022) wrote in Capitalist Realism that it is now "easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism." Millet's parents are a more decadent statement of this immobility; it is easier for them to imagine the end of civilization than their vacation (Canavan, 2012).

The children, particularly the narrator, Evie, bear the actual psychological toll of the novel. It is they who take the pain and fear their parents will not face. The irresponsible attitude of the adults makes them overgrow into practical adults earlier than usual, a form of crisis-induced parentification that forces them to assume leadership roles (O'Brien et al., 2018). They make the house safe, care for the younger ones, and leave their parents to flee danger. Their journey is one bleak exodus, a search for a future their parents have forfeited. Millet captures the specific emotional register of young climate activism with unflinching exactness: an overwhelming combination of fury, resignation, and black resolution, a complex of feelings now recognized as characteristic of climate anxiety (Pihkala, 2022). The children's psychological state is one of profound bereavement—not for a past they barely knew, but for the safe future promised them and now lost. This feeling of betrayal and moral injury at the hands of neglectful adult authorities is a globally documented phenomenon among young people (Hickman et al., 2021). The novel's title is incredibly ironic; the kids have to create their own functional and moral scripture to survive because the adult scripture they have been provided turns out to be completely bankrupt.

Environmental Racism and Inequality

One of the earliest fibs of environmentalism was the assertion that global warming would be a "great equalizer," a threat evenly distributed across all humankind. With decades of environmental justice scholarship behind it, contemporary fiction loudly denies this one. These novels reveal that climate change is, instead, a "great magnifier," exaggerating existing disparities of race, class, and geography. The work of sociologist Robert Bullard (2018), also known as the father of environmental justice, had previously indicated that in America, toxic waste dumps and industrial polluters tended to cluster in Black and minority communities. Climate change follows the same cruel logic. The most damaged will be the most exposed people, who have caused the least damage.

Omar El Akkad's American War is a searing novelization of this premise. Writing of a Second American Civil War in the late 21st century, the novel conjures up a war that erupts when the industrialized North, ravaged by sea levels that have risen, enacts a ban on fossil fuels, a move that bankrupts the economy of the "Magenta States" in the South. The conflict that ensues is not one of policy but one of class and regional resentment underneath, driven by the climate catastrophe, illustrating how

environmental stressors can act as a "threat multiplier" for political instability (Selby et al., 2017). The novel's protagonist, Sarat Chestnut, is a product of this ecological injustice. She was born in the Louisiana Delta, already sinking into the sea, and her life is shattered when her family is forced into a refugee camp after her father is killed. The Camp Patience refugee camp is a testament to state failure and eco-colonialism, where refugee Southerners are confined and policed and become fertile ground for recruitment into radicalism (Diez et al, 2016).

El Akkad deftly depicts how personal tragedy is politicized into extremism. Sarat's becoming a hardened terrorist from being an innocent kid is only due to the accumulation of atrocities she has to endure at the hands of a climactic policy-fueled war. Even her body turns into a map of the unfairness of the war—mutilated by a bombing, hardened by indoctrination. The book is a powerful indictment of the "solutions" to climate change that take no account of justice. By creating "sacrificial zones" in the Global South—or in this case, the American South—the exploitative North attempts to save itself while continuing to deepen precisely those colonial dynamics that created the crisis (Whyte, 2017). El Akkad's near-future dystopia does not seem so far away because it extrapolates from today's reality of environmental racism, from the lead-contaminated water in Flint, Michigan, to Hurricane Katrina's disproportionate destruction of Black New Orleans citizens (Bullard, 2005). The book argues that social-justice-free climate politics is not a solution but a new kind of violence.

Although less overt, environmental inequality also structures A Children's Bible(2020). The moneyed families who are the novel's subject are initially sheltered by their wealth. They reside in a protected summer home, are well-stocked, and can afford to turn away from the ills of the world. Their encounter with the working-class owner of the rented dwelling, and subsequently with starving families along the road, underscores this stark class divide. The crisis takes away their complacency, but they start from a position of gigantic privilege compared to someone with nowhere else to fall back to (Islam & Winkel, 2017). Millet implicitly demonstrates how the "apocalypse" is not a fixed state but a gradated one, and one that is determined by the capital one possesses (Jorgenson et al, 2019).

Post-Apocalyptic and Near-Future Narratives

To make the effect of climate inaction visceral, most authors take recourse to the narrative technologies of near-future and post-apocalyptic fiction. However, unlike classic science fiction's extrapolation of distant futures on distant planets, Cli-Fi today builds proximate and familiar dystopias (Robbins & Moore, 2013). It obfuscates the distinction between realism and prophecy, implying that the apocalypse will not happen at some point in the future as a threat to be mitigated, but has already started. Such stories work by extrapolating current trends—institutional collapse, political polarization, infrastructure vulnerability—logically into a broken-down or breaking-down future, serving as cautionary tales that give tangible form to abstract risks (Milner & Burgmann, 2023).

American War is strongest in this mode of realistic extrapolation. El Akkad constructs his future America on low-tech reality, not high-tech fantasy: on the nasty realities of modern collapsed states. There are drone bombings and suicide bombings, foreign intervention in a civil war (the Bouazizi Empire, a direct reference to the Arab Spring), and massive refugee camps. By mapping the political vocabulary of Middle Eastern conflict in the 21st century onto the American one, he is taking something boldly defamiliarizing (O'Gorman & Eaglestone, 2019). He forces the Americans to see their own country as it too frequently sees itself from outside its borders: an exposed empire, subject to the same forces of internal decay that any other nation would know. At its heart is the collapse of the infrastructure: roads unpassable, communication networks down, and the federal government far away and irrelevant. This is not an overnight asteroid impact but a slow grinding deterioration, a political rot fueled by environmental pressure. The book powerfully implies that the institutions that we assume to be permanent are hugely vulnerable to such cascading, cross-system failures (Homer-Dixon et al., 2015).

Lydia Millet's A Children's Bible (2020) stages a "micro-apocalypse," taking advantage of the isolated position of the summer house to stage a larger societal breakdown. The big storm that seems to sweep in is the catalyst, isolating the characters from the modern world instantly. The electricity fails, cell phones lose reception, and the networks that underpin civilized existence disappear from the scene in one night. Adults, who are entirely dependent on this infrastructure, are rendered helpless. It is the kids who understand the new world. Once they are out of the house, their journey is through a collapsing world. They encounter the other survivors, witness the breakdown of society, and must rely on their wits and a new respect for nature to survive. Millet's account

indicates that the collapse will be no cinematic moment, but a sequence of system failures wherein individuals are cast loose to reconstitute society, haphazardly and locally (Blanton et al, 2020). The most terrifying aspect of the novel is its realism; the things that happen read less as some dystopian fantasy, but rather as a possible Tuesday in the near future, reflecting a growing literary interest in the "banal apocalypse" where catastrophe unfolds within the mundane textures of everyday life (Braun, 2024).

New Relationships with Nature and the Nonhuman

While most of these books are filled with fear and sadness, they are not merely pessimistic exercises. Analytically, they are also arenas of reconstructive imagination, sketching new possibilities of the nonhuman world and how to see and inhabit it. Outside of the strictly anthropocentric imagination, they point towards an ethics of interdependence and kinship, concepts forcefully articulated by scholars like Donna Haraway. In Staying with the Trouble (2020), Haraway invites us to "make kin" in the broadest sense, to form relationships of responsibility and care not only with other humans but with other creatures and even with the planet itself. This "compostist" approach, which refuses human exceptionalism, is the core of the most hopeful movements in recent climate fiction.

The Overstory (2018)is the most profound and ambitious exploration of this post-humanist perspective. The novel's radical gesture is to take trees not as setting, symbol, or utility, but as characters (Heise, 2019). Its narrative structure, forking and linking like the roots of a woodland, places the lives of nine human figures whose lives ineluctably tie in with trees at its center. Through Patricia Westerford's science, the reader learns about the breathtaking fecundity of forest life—how trees communicate through fungal webs, warn each other of threats, and share resources (Hagen, 2018; Masiero, 2020). Powers is not just storytelling; he attempts to redirect the reader's mind and construct a botanical awareness. The activists of the novel who chain themselves to ancient redwood forests are more than just protesters; they are attempting to practice a new kind of kinship. They manage to inhabit the trees, seeing them as autonomous life forms worthy of defending. The novel contends that the crisis of the environment arises from an inherent lack of imagination—our inability to perceive the nonhuman world as anything more than a standing reserve for human use (Heidegger, 1977). The remedy, Powers contends, is not merely technological but perceptual: a radical decentering of the human to acknowledge our position within a vast web of life (Pelizzon, 2025). This

is in line with the argument of Bruno Latour (2004) for a "parliament of things" in which nonhuman agencies are given a voice in the political process. The Overstory (2018)is an ambitious attempt to summon such a parliament into session.

Even in the dark universe of A Children's Bible, there is a new connection with nature between the children. While the children flee their parents, they are accompanied by the younger brother, Jack, an innocent who loves nature and gathers and cares for a menagerie of animals. At first, this seems to be an innocent flight of imagination, but it later becomes the new moral anchor of the group. In contrast to their narcissism, their focus on animals is an initial expression of good stewardship and a form of multispecies care ethics (Coulter, 2016; Watson, 2016). They learn to interpret weather signs, find shelter, and coexist with their environment in a manner their parents could not. Their very existence depends upon giving up the anthropocentric pride of their upbringings and learning how to become humble-minded about the nonhuman world. They are, in Haraway's terms, "making kin" as a means of survival (Haraway, 2020).

Conclusion

Contemporary American climate fiction is a necessary cultural response to the defining crisis of our times. Works by writers such as Richard Powers, Lydia Millet, and Omar El Akkad, among many others, have heeded Amitav Ghosh's (2018)challenge and asserted that serious fiction can adequately face up to the sheer size and complexity of the Anthropocene. These novels are far more than dystopian warnings; they are deeply invested in the difficult work of cultural and psychological transformation. They provide a lexicon for ecological grief and climate suffering, allowing us to grieve together the loss of a world we once took for granted. They are blunt in their criticism of the social order, exposing environmental racism and brutal inequalities that the climate emergency will only worsen.

Most of all, these novels are acts of profound imagination. Making likely near-future catastrophes seem plausible makes the avoidability of harms bone-chillingly concrete. Nudging towards post-humanist ethics—one of family, need, and transgressive respect for the nonhuman—gives glimpses of another possible future. Literature cannot, in and of itself, lower carbon emissions or re-freeze the poles. However, it can change human consciousness. It can inspire sympathy for our fellow human beings in sacrifice zones and the ecosystems whose fate is tied up with ours. In representing the abstract fear of climate change as lived-through, experienced fact, these novels facilitate the eco-

conscious imagination necessary for our survival as a species. They desecrate the peace of our ignorance and force us to see the world as it is, in return for jeopardizing the fantasy of what it might still become. Truly, there are fewer stories about the end of the world than stories about what it might take to finally, at last, begin to live within it.

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