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IMAGINING AFTER TOMORROW: CLIMATE FUTURITY AND THE POLITICS OF SURVIVAL IN CONTEMPORARY CLIMATE FICTION

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Abstract

Climate change has transformed contemporary literature by challenging conventional ideas of nature, time, human agency, and the future. Climate fiction, or "cli-fi," has emerged as a significant literary mode through which writers imagine the consequences of ecological disruption while questioning the political and ethical structures that produce environmental crisis. This paper examines the concept of **climate futurity** in contemporary climate fiction, arguing that these narratives do more than predict ecological catastrophe: they construct competing visions of how human beings might inhabit an uncertain future. Focusing primarily on Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* (2020), Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993), Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* (2012), and Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018), the paper investigates the relationship between climate crisis, survival, collective responsibility, environmental justice, and political imagination. Drawing on ecocriticism, Anthropocene studies, environmental justice theory, and theories of futurity, it argues that contemporary climate fiction shifts the literary imagination from the question of whether humanity will survive toward the more complex question of **what kind of future is worth surviving for**. These novels expose the unequal distribution of environmental vulnerability and challenge individualistic models of survival by emphasizing community, ecological interdependence, adaptation, and collective action. Climate futurity therefore becomes not merely a representation of tomorrow but a critical space in which literature interrogates present political choices and imagines alternative ecological futures.

Keywords: Climate fiction, climate futurity, ecocriticism, Anthropocene, environmental justice, survival, ecological imagination, climate change, futurity

1. Introduction

Climate change is one of the defining crises of the contemporary world. Unlike a conventional disaster, however, climate change is difficult to represent through a single dramatic event. It unfolds across decades and centuries, affects different geographical regions unevenly, and

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connects apparently distant phenomena such as melting ice, rising temperatures, drought, migration, biodiversity loss, and political instability. Literature therefore faces a distinctive representational problem: how can a narrative centred on individual lives make perceptible a crisis that operates simultaneously on planetary and intimate scales?

Climate fiction has emerged as one response to this problem. Commonly abbreviated as "cli-fi," climate fiction encompasses a range of literary forms, including speculative fiction, dystopia, science fiction, realism, literary fiction, and post-apocalyptic narrative. Literary scholarship has identified climate fiction as an important contemporary mode because it enables writers to transform an apparently abstract environmental crisis into experiences of fear, loss, responsibility, conflict, adaptation, and hope.

The importance of climate fiction lies not simply in its ability to predict future environmental conditions. Its deeper significance is its capacity to ask questions about **futurity**. What does the future mean when ecological stability can no longer be taken for granted? Who is allowed to imagine a future? Who is expected to sacrifice for it? Whose future is protected by political and economic institutions, and whose future is rendered disposable?

These questions lead to the central concept of this paper: **climate futurity**.

Climate futurity can be understood as the imaginative, ethical, and political process through which literature constructs possible relationships between the present ecological crisis and the futures that may emerge from it. Climate fiction consequently becomes a space where competing models of survival are tested. Some novels imagine isolated individuals struggling against ecological collapse; others emphasise community, cooperation, ecological knowledge, political transformation, or new forms of human-nonhuman relationship.

This paper argues that contemporary climate fiction increasingly moves beyond a simple **apocalypse-versus-survival** structure. Instead, it asks what kinds of social and ecological relationships could make survival meaningful. Climate fiction therefore becomes political because the future it imagines is inseparable from questions of justice, power, inequality, economics, colonialism, and collective responsibility.

2. Climate Fiction and the Anthropocene

The emergence of climate fiction is closely connected with the intellectual concept of the **Anthropocene**, a term used to describe the period in which human activity has become a significant force shaping planetary systems. Literary scholars have argued that Anthropocene literature requires new narrative strategies because the traditional opposition between "human culture" and "natural environment" becomes increasingly difficult to sustain.

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The Anthropocene changes the literary understanding of nature. Nature is no longer simply an external landscape against which human stories occur. Human activity is embedded within atmospheric, geological, biological, and climatic processes. Recent scholarship describes climate fiction as a particularly significant literary form for exploring this transformation.

Climate change also creates a problem of **scale**. An individual cannot directly perceive the entire planetary climate system. A person may experience a heatwave, drought, flood, or failed harvest, but those individual experiences are connected to processes extending across continents and generations.

This tension between the local and the planetary is central to climate fiction. The novel becomes a form through which planetary crisis can be translated into human experience.

However, the term "Anthropocene" can itself become problematic if it suggests that all humans are equally responsible for climate change. Climate fiction increasingly raises questions about the unequal distribution of environmental responsibility and vulnerability. Industrial capitalism, colonial extraction, resource exploitation, and economic inequality complicate the idea of a universally responsible "humanity."

Consequently, climate futurity must be understood through **environmental justice** as well as ecological crisis.

3. From Climate Catastrophe to Climate Futurity

Early discussions of climate fiction often focused on catastrophe. Drought, floods, famine, ecological collapse, mass migration, and social disorder became recurring narrative devices. Such representations can generate awareness by making an otherwise abstract crisis emotionally tangible.

Yet catastrophe alone cannot explain the literary importance of climate fiction.

Matthew Benjamin Cole observes that contemporary climate fiction increasingly moves beyond purely catastrophic representation toward questions of agency and political responsibility.

This shift is crucial.

A purely apocalyptic narrative can produce the impression that climate change is an unavoidable disaster. Climate futurity introduces a different question:

What can still be changed?

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The future in climate fiction is therefore not necessarily predetermined. It becomes a contested space.

This can be represented through three broad models:

1. **Apocalyptic futurity** – the future is imagined primarily as collapse.
2. **Adaptational futurity** – human communities survive by changing their social and ecological practices.
3. **Transformative futurity** – climate crisis becomes an opportunity to construct fundamentally different political, economic, and ecological relationships.

Contemporary climate fiction frequently moves between these three models.

4. Survival and the Politics of the Future in *Parable of the Sower*

Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* provides an important early example of climate-related speculative fiction. Published in 1993, the novel imagines a future United States destabilised by environmental degradation, water scarcity, economic inequality, social fragmentation, and political violence.

The novel is significant because survival is never presented simply as an individual biological achievement.

Lauren Olamina, the protagonist, recognises that the social order surrounding her is collapsing. Her response is not to seek a permanent refuge but to imagine a new community. The development of Earthseed represents an attempt to transform catastrophe into a philosophy of adaptation and collective possibility.

The novel's treatment of survival therefore challenges the fantasy of the isolated survivor. Survival requires:

- community,
- cooperation,
- mobility,
- adaptability,
- knowledge,
- imagination,
- and collective responsibility.

Butler's vision is especially significant because climate vulnerability is inseparable from race, class, gender, and political inequality. The future is not experienced equally by everyone.

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This anticipates a central principle of climate justice: environmental crisis does not erase existing inequalities; it often intensifies them.

Parable of the Sower therefore presents futurity as a political process. The future must be constructed rather than passively awaited.

5. Ecological Interdependence in *The Overstory*

Richard Powers's *The Overstory* approaches environmental crisis from a different perspective. Instead of beginning with a spectacular climate catastrophe, the novel develops an expansive narrative centred on trees, forests, and interconnected human lives.

The novel challenges anthropocentrism by disrupting the assumption that humans occupy the centre of ecological existence.

Trees become more than background scenery. They participate in a larger ecological system that exceeds human temporal and perceptual limitations.

This is important for climate futurity because the future is not exclusively a human future.

If forests disappear, the consequences extend across multiple species and ecological systems. The novel consequently encourages readers to imagine **multispecies futures**.

The importance of this approach has become increasingly visible in contemporary climate-fiction scholarship. Recent research on climate fiction examines how speculative narratives can move beyond anthropocentric perspectives and imagine relational forms of ecological existence.

The Overstory therefore expands the meaning of survival. Survival cannot mean simply the continuation of human society. It must involve the preservation of ecological relationships that make human existence possible.

6. Climate, Gender, and Environmental Awareness in *Flight Behavior*

Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* provides another model of climate futurity by connecting environmental disruption with everyday social life.

The novel centres on an ecological disturbance involving monarch butterflies and uses this event to introduce questions about climate change into a rural community.

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Kingsolver avoids presenting climate change solely as a distant scientific problem. Instead, ecological transformation enters the ordinary lives of people whose economic, social, and cultural circumstances shape their ability to understand and respond to environmental change.

This is particularly important because climate change is not only a scientific issue. It is also a question of:

- class,
- gender,
- labour,
- education,
- rural life,
- economic vulnerability,
- and access to scientific knowledge.

The novel demonstrates how environmental consciousness develops through encounters with material changes in the world.

Climate futurity here begins with **recognition**.

Before communities can imagine alternative futures, they must first recognise that the familiar world is changing.

7. Collective Politics in *the Ministry for the Future*

Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* represents perhaps the clearest movement from climate catastrophe toward climate political imagination.

Published in 2020, the novel imagines the creation of an international institution whose purpose is to represent future generations and protect the interests of life on Earth.

Rather than presenting climate change solely as an individual psychological crisis, Robinson examines:

- international governance,
- economics,
- carbon reduction,
- migration,
- technological transformation,
- ecological restoration,
- political conflict,
- and collective action.

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The novel consequently transforms the climate novel into something resembling a laboratory for political thought.

Recent scholarship explicitly argues that climate fiction can be read as a form of political theory because it generates alternative "ecopolitical imaginaries" and enables readers to consider different forms of future governance.

Robinson's novel is especially significant because it rejects the assumption that the only possible climate future is dystopian.

It asks whether institutions can change quickly enough to respond to planetary crisis.

The future therefore becomes a **political project**.

8. Climate Justice and Unequal Futures

One of the most important dimensions of climate futurity is the recognition that there is no single universal climate future.

Climate change produces differentiated futures.

Some communities possess economic resources, technological infrastructure, political influence, and geographical advantages that allow them to adapt more easily. Others face greater vulnerability because of poverty, displacement, colonial histories, or dependence on fragile ecosystems.

Recent climate-fiction scholarship has emphasised precisely this problem. Climate impacts frequently fall most heavily on already marginalised populations, while some contemporary cli-fi narratives challenge colonial, patriarchal, and anthropocentric assumptions by centring climate justice.

This creates an important distinction between:

survival and **just survival**.

A wealthy minority surviving inside protected technological spaces does not necessarily constitute a successful climate future.

Climate fiction can therefore ask:

Who survives?

But more importantly:

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Under what conditions do they survive?

And:

Who is excluded from that future?

These questions transform climate fiction from environmental storytelling into political critique.

9. Climate Futurity and Colonialism

Climate futurity must also be examined through the history of colonialism.

Colonial systems have historically transformed landscapes through extraction, plantation economies, mining, deforestation, and resource exploitation. Contemporary climate crisis cannot therefore be separated from histories of unequal environmental power.

Some climate narratives reproduce colonial assumptions by imagining environmental collapse as a return to "savagery." Scholarship has identified the persistence of such neo-colonial narratives in climate fiction and argued that they can restrict the imaginative possibilities of climate futurity.

This is a crucial critical distinction.

A climate future should not simply reproduce the colonial opposition between:

- civilisation and wilderness,
- modernity and primitiveness,
- technological society and nature.

Instead, climate fiction can imagine futures based on plural ecological knowledges.

Indigenous approaches are particularly significant here. Recent scholarship argues that Indigenous cultural frameworks challenge Western assumptions about what constitutes a "climate story," emphasising relationships with Country, place, ancestors, and more-than-human life.

Climate futurity therefore becomes more productive when it includes **decolonial futurity**.

10. The Ethics of Future Generations

Another important dimension of climate futurity is intergenerational ethics.

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Climate change raises a unique moral problem because many consequences of present actions will be experienced by people who do not yet exist.

The future generation therefore becomes an ethical presence in contemporary climate fiction.

The Ministry for the Future literalises this idea by creating an institution dedicated to representing future interests.

Other novels approach it indirectly through children, descendants, ecological inheritance, or the loss of landscapes.

Literature can make this temporal relationship emotionally comprehensible.

A future person is not merely an abstract statistical figure. Through narrative, the future can become imaginable as a world inhabited by people with relationships, memories, desires, and vulnerabilities.

Climate fiction therefore transforms **future generations from an abstraction into an ethical community**.

11. Hope, Fear, and the Politics of Imagination

Climate fiction frequently operates between two powerful emotions: **fear and hope**.

Fear is important because climate change requires recognition of genuine danger. However, excessive reliance on catastrophe can create fatalism.

If readers believe that ecological collapse is inevitable, political action may appear meaningless.

Hope offers another possibility.

But climate hope should not be confused with naïve optimism.

A productive climate narrative may acknowledge:

- ecological loss,
- irreversible damage,
- uncertainty,
- grief,
- injustice,

while still imagining forms of collective action.

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This can be described as **critical hope**.

Climate futurity is therefore not the promise that everything will be fine. Rather, it is the recognition that the future remains partially open and that present choices influence its possibilities.

Recent scholarship similarly argues that climate fiction can create imaginative spaces in which catastrophic realities are transformed into alternative collective visions of the future.

12. Beyond Survival: Toward Ecological Transformation

The central contribution of climate futurity is that it changes the meaning of survival.

Traditional survival narratives often ask:

How can the individual remain alive?

Climate fiction increasingly asks:

How can communities continue to exist?

And beyond that:

How can human societies exist without destroying the ecological systems upon which they depend?

This movement can be represented as:

Individual survival → Community survival → Ecological survival → Just and sustainable futurity

This progression is particularly visible when the four novels considered in this paper are read together.

Butler emphasises adaptive communities.

Kingsolver emphasises ecological awareness within ordinary social life.

Powers emphasises human dependence on more-than-human systems.

Robinson emphasises collective political transformation.

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Together, these texts demonstrate that climate futurity cannot be reduced to technological solutions. It involves a transformation of social imagination.

13. Conclusion

Contemporary climate fiction does not merely predict ecological disaster. Its deeper function is to transform the future into a literary and political question.

Parable of the Sower, *Flight Behavior*, *The Overstory*, and *The Ministry for the Future* demonstrate different approaches to climate futurity. Butler imagines adaptation through community; Kingsolver connects ecological disruption with everyday social and gender relations; Powers challenges anthropocentric understandings of survival; and Robinson constructs an expansive political imagination of collective climate action.

Taken together, these works demonstrate that climate change cannot be understood solely as an environmental problem. It is also a problem of imagination.

The central question is not simply whether humanity will survive climate change. The more significant question is **what kind of world humanity will attempt to preserve, transform, or create**.

Climate futurity therefore becomes a critical concept because it connects environmental crisis with political possibility. It reveals that futures are not simply waiting to happen. They are produced through decisions made in the present.

Climate fiction consequently functions as a literary rehearsal space for possible worlds. It allows readers to encounter ecological loss, imagine alternative forms of social organisation, question inherited political structures, and reconsider the relationship between humans and the more-than-human world.

The most valuable climate fiction therefore does not ask readers merely to fear tomorrow.

It asks them to **imagine what tomorrow could become—and what must change today for that future to remain possible**.

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