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ROUNDTABLE 2: CLIMATE CHANGE

Engaging with Climate Change through Tales

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Abstract

This essay takes up the question of how literature can help us adapt to a world in which climate change is an ongoing reality. Climate literature offers a promising realm in which scholars are reckoning with the central humanistic problem of how we make sense of a world undergoing the chaos of climate change. This essay explores the climate literature anthology *Tales of Two Planets* for how its stories and essays model a practice of narrative agency—the ability to consciously identify, dispense with, and create the tales we tell ourselves about climate change. The narrative agency that climate literature like *Tales of Two Planets* promotes has the potential to widen its readers' locus of control in environments where there is very little to begin with.

Keywords: climate change; climate literature; narrative agency; public discourse; science fiction

Climate change discourse in the public sphere has primarily focused on problems and solutions.[1] News reports, documentaries, blockbuster films, popular fiction, and various other media have detailed at length a vision of environmental collapse that communicates the magnitude (and legitimacy) of the problem while promoting a sense of moral urgency about the need to *do something.*[2] Cultural geographer and climate researcher, Mike Hulme, who wrote the book *Why We Disagree about Climate Change?* suggests that this approach is too simplistic to truly capture the scope of the phenomenon when he writes, "Climate change is not 'a problem' waiting for 'a solution.'"[3] For climate change researchers like Hulme, to move forward, humanity must first reckon with the central humanistic problem of how we make sense of the Anthropocene.

Climate literature offers one promising realm of material in which this humanistic reckoning is beginning to take place.[4] This subset of literature includes a range of genres from climate fiction (aka CliFi) to essays, drama, poetry, and popular nonfiction. While climate literature certainly amplifies climate-based themes within the public sphere, in doing so, it sheds light on these themes from various points of view, refracting climate change discourse through ethnic, psychological, cultural, aesthetic, and philosophical lenses. This is precisely

[1] Goodman, McNatt, and Boykoff 2023.
[2] Segovia 2021.
[3] Hulme 2009/10, 41.
[4] Ghosh 2016.

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the kind of interpretive work with climate change, conceived of as a public cultural domain, that climate-change researchers like Mike Hulme are advocating. And yet, climate literature also has an uncanny knack for mining key elements that are missing from the public discourse, which, when discovered, often resonate quite broadly. This essay deals with one of these themes in particular: the question of how to live in a world where climate change, and its effects, are already a reality—what scholars who write about climate literature have described as adaptation or "resilience."[5]

In the fall semester of 2024, I taught for the first time a climate literature anthology titled *Tales of Two Planets.*[6] The anthology is an international collection of climate literature with the stated goal of illustrating the disparate effects of climate change across the globe. The reaction from my students upon reading some of these writings was electric. As we entered the unit, students expected more information about how we are all doomed. Instead, they came alive when exposed to some of the fresh ideas and reactions to these problems presented in the book. What my students seemed struck by the most and what this essay aims to explore is that *Tales of Two Planets* models a much-needed adaptation to a world plunged into constant climate crisis. Many of the essays and fiction in the collection demonstrate, whether via its writers, narrators, or characters, a capacity for what Hanna Meretoja calls "narrative agency," or the ability to consciously identify, dispense with, and create the various narratives that circulate around climate change.[7] In other words, *Tales of Two Planets* specifically advocates a form of critical literacy about the public discourse around the Anthropocene.

Meretoja defines "narrative agency" very simply as "the ability to navigate narrative environments."[8] In her own work on trauma and cancer narratives, Meretoja has shown how narrative agency is an especially resilient approach to sense-making in the face of challenging circumstances. One of her most moving examples of this concept is a very personal and intimate talk that she gave during COVID for the Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities, where she shared how her awareness of common cancer and illness narratives helped her to step away from problematic war analogies (e.g., the "battle" with cancer) toward more productive perspectives.[9] Climate change, like cancer, is itself a challenging "narrative environment" in which individuals and communities struggle to give meaning to uncertain conditions and futures that often defy narrative description.

The rest of this essay will look specifically at how *Tales of Two Planets* demonstrates how narrative agency can help us to engage, handle, interpret, and understand our climate-change reality. Climate literature's capacity for social change has been well discussed in the last couple of decades, particularly in the context of the rise of CliFi. The focus on narrative agency in *Tales* adds an important new dimension to this discussion. Positive treatments of climate literature generally call attention to its capacity for critical thinking and social change.[10] The theme of narrative agency that runs throughout *Tales of Two Planets* shifts the focus from what to think and do about the environment itself to more existential questions of what attitudes to adopt when navigating this changing landscape. While it might be tempting to accuse narrative agency as a retreat into navel gazing, its radical

[5] Tegelberg 2023.
[6] Freeman 2020.
[7] Meretoja 2020.
[8] Meretoja, Kinnunen, and Kosonen 2022, 387.
[9] Meretoja 2020.
[10] Jameson 2005; Streeby 2018.

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transformations of our narrative outlook open new paths forward that could not previously be imagined.

In the climate dystopia "Survival," Sayaka Murata dissects cultural assumptions and expectations about what it means to survive in a world devastated by climate change.[11] In a future Tokyo where the rains are always heavy and the few animals left are cats and cockroaches, people compete for resources by attaining survival ratings on a scale of A to D. The "A"s live in high-rise apartments with comfortable air conditioning and the "D"s drift into the wilderness where they live in packs and grow fur. The protagonist, Miss Kumi Suzuki, has enjoyed an A-level life due to a romantic relationship, but, in her heart, she does not have the energy or motivation to maintain that status. Demonstrating "narrative agency," she questions the "survival ratings" and begins to see this way of thinking as a disease that has affected society—"And it's because we're all controlled by our survival ratings that you're renting such an expensive apartment and keeping it cool. It really creeps me out!"[12] Kjersti Fløttum and Øyvind Gjerstad, in their article "Narratives in Climate Change Discourse," see a narrative approach to climate change as useful for identifying what's missing from narratives, thus laying bare the "controversial points of view" that may lie hidden beneath them.[13] Murata's story identifies one of these dirty little secrets in how our public discourse often fails to seriously consider forms of survival that let go of privilege, comfort, and other taken-for-granted expectations of human thriving. Once Suzuki is freed from this tacit assumption, the protagonist can calmly accept the life of the Ds, who procreate in the rains and roam the countryside in packs, a dark but sustainable lifestyle that echoes the forms of post-apocalyptic communitarianism that Rebecca McWilliams and colleagues have called attention to in Octavia Butler's fiction.[14] The protagonist of "Survival," however, is only able to embrace such a divergent lifestyle because of her hyperawareness of the stories her culture holds dear about life after climate change. In this way, Murata's story demonstrates how new visions about "survival" post-climate change become feasible from a perspective of narrative agency.

Murata's story demonstrates truly practical ways in which speculative climate fiction can alter our relationship with the environment, following a recent pattern of critics taking the genre seriously as an agent for social change. In her introduction to *Imagining the Future of Climate Change*, Shelley Streeby sums up some of the twists and turns in the history of science fiction's growing reputation as a change agent. While it was originally dismissed as out of touch with present-day problems, critics like Frederick Jameson have highlighted its ability to denaturalize and promote a critical mindset about the present. Streeby adds to this claim her conviction that speculative fiction connects people to social movements, which ripple into real-world transformation.[15] Seen in this context, a literal reading of Murata's story might appear to promote joining pacifist environmental groups that adopt the principles of Anarcho-primitivism, the view that civilization contains within it the seeds of environmental disaster and the only logical response is to leave it behind altogether. The Ds departure from civilization certainly seems to follow a similar ideology.

Murata's sci-fi, however, adds yet another turn to this history of the genre. Narrative agency has the unique characteristic of being both critical and creative. It takes apart, but it does so

[11] Murata 2020.
[12] Murata 2020, 57.
[13] Fløttum and Gjerstad 2017.
[14] McWilliams et al. 2024.
[15] Streeby 2018, 5.

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as a way of putting back together. One might argue that "Survival" adds a deeply speculative spin on speculative fiction that in many ways recalls the pre-new wave works of the Golden Age. When Isaac Asimov first aims to raise the status of science fiction in his article "Escape into Reality," he briefly describes it as "tr[ying] on various changes for size."[16] While Murata's "Survival" no doubt points the way to existing environmental movements a la Streeby, it does not do so blindly. Instead, in the guise of Miss Kim Suzuki's pesky questioning and curiosity about the narrative underpinnings of each and every situation (like a workshop where she wonders if it's a tad counterintuitive to study the basics of going "feral"), Murata provides a how-to manual for treating stories as practical tools, rather than rigid dogmas.[17] Our operational narrative framework is to be viewed with a mindset open to suspicion, creation, and most importantly, of-the-moment revision that better aligns it with the needs and demands of the status quo.

Andri Snær Magnason's essay on glaciologists mapping uncharted new lands left in the wake of glacial melting offers a theoretical framework for thinking about this approach to climate change.[18] In the essay, the author's grandmother explains that she and her husband were not cold when they got stuck overnight in one of these snow-covered lands because they were "just married!"[19] The land, formerly an impersonal set of coordinates ("N64.35.378, W16 44.691"), is given the joyful name "Bride's Belly" after this first memorable event that ever happened there.[20] For Magnason, the problem humans face is the fresh meaninglessness of their transformed landscape; his hope is that human stories will give renewed life to these environments. He asks us to adopt a mindset of narrative agency by seeing narratives themselves as a mechanism for reestablishing meaningful relationships with a world that is quickly being rendered unrecognizable.

Another Icelandic author, Sjon, follows this logic all the way to what is perhaps the collection's most audacious claim.[21] He proposes that narratives are so powerful a tool for navigating our relationship and approach to climate change that we should adopt a preservationist approach to literature—"to ensure that it has a secure place in human existence."[22] In this view, any narrative, no matter how seemingly insignificant, such as the little-known tale of the "Winter Bull" of the Sakha people or a poem about a moth that drinks the tears of sleeping birds, may possess exactly the way of relating to the world that modern culture desperately needs.[23] Sjon formulates this idea during his stay at the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, which has begun to call for collaboration with poets and artists. His methodology of treating literature and culture as an untapped repository for useful orientations toward the environment echoes Hulme's claim that to engage with climate-change discourse effectively, we must understand it from as many different perspectives as possible.[24] The very idea of approaching literature as a body of work for diversifying our interpretation and engagement with the physical world embodies an attitude of narrative agency in which readers pick up narratives as tools for looking at and interacting with the changes in the world around us. It restores a sense of responsibility,

[16] Asimov 1957, 332.
[17] Murata 2020, 54–55.
[18] Magnason 2020.
[19] Magnason 2020, 4.
[20] Magnason 2020, 5.
[21] Sjón 2020.
[22] Sjón 2020, 267.
[23] Sjón 2020, 267.
[24] Hulme 2009/10, 41.

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not in the typical sense of solving climate change as a "problem" (though it may help with that as well), but for recognizing that we are all cocreators and consumers of the cultural conversation taking place around this phenomenon.

It is on this point that I would like to end this essay. When I adopted this text for my literature and science course, I had no idea how strongly students would react. What became clear over the course of those discussions is that our students' generation, having grown up as passive recipients of various stories, tales, factoids, theories, and ideas about what is happening to the environment, deeply crave a way to navigate this confusing new reality. Every time they encountered yet another example of a savvy, narrative-informed character or author breaking down our world in terms of the "tales" we tell ourselves about climate change, their engagement and willingness to connect at a personal and authentic level increased. They seemed to be demonstrating what econarratologists Erin James and Eric Morel understand as the power of literature to let readers "try on" or "simulate the emotional states and experience of characters and/or narrators."[25] *Tales of Two Planets*, as I hope this essay shows, demonstrates a very real need and desire within the public consciousness for such models of narrative agency in the face of climate change. This makes perfect sense when we recall that one of the key issues with climate change as a problem is the overwhelming sense of helplessness in the face of what often feels like an unfathomable and inevitable narrative arc. Without diminishing the need for urgency, the narrative agency that some climate literature can promote widens its readers' locus of control in a situation where there is very little to begin with.

Kevin Piper is a faculty member in the English Department at Madison Area Technical College, where he has taught composition, literature, and communication courses since 2011. He has over 20 years of teaching experience. His teaching and research interests include English pedagogy, Indigenous literatures, climate fiction, and literature and science.

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[25] James and Morel 2020, 11.

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