Public Humanities (2026), 2, e77, 1–3
doi:10.1017/pub.2026.10185

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS PUBLIC HUMANITIES

INTRODUCTION TO ROUNDTABLE 2: CLIMATE CHANGE

Introduction: Climate Change and Sustainability

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(Received 27 February 2026; revised 14 March 2026; accepted 17 April 2026)

As Lucy Grace writes, "Our lives are a bundle of stories."[1] In fact, even the self, that seemingly solid and continuous "I" we carry through the world, is a story, a narrative we construct and reconstruct by piecing together memories and experiences into what feels like, as Guy Saunders writes, "a single unified self."[2] We are thus all storytellers at heart, and the story we are most often telling, retelling, and revising is ourselves. As cognitive scientist Daniel Dennett argues in *Consciousness Explained*, our selves are "magnificent fictions," not "independently existing soul-pearls" but "artifacts of the social processes that create us."[3] We do not discover who we are; we narrate ourselves into being.

Neuroscience confirms this. Neuroplasticity, the brain's ability to form new pathways in response to new experiences and ways of thinking, means that the stories we tell are not just descriptions of who we are but active forces in determining who we become. The narrative shapes the neural structure; the neural structure shapes the behavior; and the behavior shapes the world. As Dennett reminds us, the self is not an isolated phenomenon but a social one, an artifact of collective processes coauthored by others and embedded in networks of relationship and recognition. This is also true of society, which functions like a larger narrative intelligence, a brain composed of brains, a story made of stories, and, like the individual brain, capable of plasticity, restructuring, and transformation.

Just as our self-narratives can be revised, so too can our collective ones. The stories we tell about human nature, about our relationship to one another and to the natural world, and about what we value, what we believe is possible, and how we respond to crises, are not innate truths but inherited constructions. They can be changed. The climate is changing, and, as the essays in this collection argue, so must our stories, both personal and collective. The dominant narrative of our moment, that we are separate from one another and from the natural world and driven by competition and self-interest, is not sustainable.

[1] Grace 2026, 3.
[2] Saunders 2014, 54.
[3] Dennett 1992, 423, 430.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10185 Published online by Cambridge University Press

All four essays in this roundtable insist that addressing the climate crisis requires expanding and transforming our imaginative capacities, moving beyond anthropocentrism, making climate knowledge accessible, and, since the climate emergency exceeds any single discipline, engaging in interdisciplinary research. Jane Arbo's essay, inspired by an extension course called "Regenerative Ecologies," which she designed and taught at the University of Pelotas in Brazil (2024), and which brought participants from across disciplines together (humanities, natural sciences, health sciences, and environmental studies), explores how we can teach climate/sustainability through science fiction. As Arbo explains, science fiction "cultivates the 'moral imagination' essential to responsible science" and "enable[s] readers to anticipate the social and environmental consequences of scientific and technological advancements."[4] For Arbo, science fiction is "a narrative space for ethical rehearsal and collective imagining," a place to practice futures before they arrive.[5] Lucy Grace, drawing on literary studies, ecocriticism, and media studies, argues that traditional linear narrative forms constrain our imaginations and that fragmentary, hybrid, and experimental texts can better represent deep-time and more-than-human perspectives. Together, these essays illustrate that both genre (science fiction) and structure (fragmentary) shape what futures we can imagine.

Kevin Piper, combining literary studies, narrative theory, and climate humanities, builds on this by theorizing "narrative agency," the capacity to consciously create new tales about climate change. Analyzing the anthology *Tales of Two Planets* and using it as a model for narrative agency, Piper reveals how climate literature can help us adapt to a world where climate change is an ongoing reality and empower readers by widening their "locus of control in a situation where there is very little to begin with."[6] Righi et al. illustrate this in practice through Indigenous Australian speculative fiction that dismantles dominant Western symbolic regimes. Drawing on Postcolonial studies, Indigenous studies, speculative fiction, and ecocriticism, and connecting the climate crisis to colonial violence, they show how Australian Indigenous/speculative fiction can challenge Western climate inaction. Both essays argue that literature gives readers agency by "expanding on our world repertoire of stories," by telling new stories in which action and real change become not just imaginable but possible.[7]

As these essays collectively suggest, climate change and narrative change are the same challenge at different scales. The atmosphere is changing (warming, destabilizing, and tipping) because the story we have been telling about ourselves has been unsustainable. Change the story, and we change our world. The question is not whether a new story is possible but whether we have the imagination and collective will to tell it.

Dr. **Shoshannah Bryn Jones Square** is an Assistant Professor in Literature, the Environment, and Climate Change at Mount Allison University. She has published articles on imagination, empathy, and emotional contagion, and co-authored "Climate Health Is Human Health: Working Through Eco-Anxiety with the Written Word in Print and Digital Media," a chapter in the *Routledge Handbook of Health and Media* (2022). She has two forthcoming book chapters, "Ecologies of Mind: Consciousness and the Natural World in Falkner," to be published in the *Routledge Companion to Mary Shelley* (edited by Michelle Faubert), and "Kindling Connections: How Diverse Neural Networks Enhance Empathy and Creativity in Higher Education," to be published in *Hope Circuits 3.0: Conversations with Luminaries*. Bryn's current research examines how literature intersects with ecology, neuroscience, and psychology,

[4] Arbo 2026, 10.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Piper 2026, 10.
[7] Righi, Winning, and Chakraborty 2026, 11.

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focusing particularly on representations of consciousness and neurodiversity in texts and exploring connections between literary works and climate activism.

Author contribution. Conceptualization: S.B.J.S.; Writing - review & editing: S.B.J.S.

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Cite this article: Jones Square, Shoshannah Bryn. 2026. "Introduction: Climate Change and Sustainability." *Public Humanities,* 2, e77, 1–3. https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10185

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10185 Published online by Cambridge University Press