International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research Studies
Volume 1, Issue 3 | July - August 2026 | https://www.ijhssrs.com
ISSN: **3139-0854**

From Environmental Crisis to Climate Trauma: New Directions in Contemporary Fiction

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Abstract

Over the past decade, climate fiction ("cli-fi") has shifted from depicting environmental crisis as an external plot event — flood, drought, storm — toward modelling climate trauma as an internal, structuring condition of narrative form itself. This article traces that shift, arguing that contemporary fiction increasingly stages what E. Ann Kaplan calls "Pretraumatic Stress Disorder": a future-oriented, anticipatory trauma that inverts the classical, retrospective model developed by Cathy Caruth. Drawing on Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence," Glenn Albrecht's "solastalgia," and Amitav Ghosh's diagnosis of literary "derangement" in the face of climate change, the article reads formal fragmentation, non-human temporality, and anticipatory dread across six recent novels: Jenny Offill's *Weather*, Richard Powers's *The Overstory*, Omar El Akkad's *American War*, Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*, Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*, and Jeff Vander Meer's *Annihilation*. It argues that these texts do not merely represent climate crisis but reorganise narrative time, voice, and scale to enact the psychological structure of trauma itself, and that this shift constitutes the most significant formal development in the climate novel since the genre's emergence.

Keywords: Climate fiction; cli-fi; climate trauma; ecocriticism; solastalgia; slow violence; Anthropocene fiction; narrative form.

Introduction

Climate fiction has, over roughly the past fifteen years, moved from the margins of literary culture to its centre. Adam Trexler's survey of the genre identifies well over one hundred and fifty novels engaging anthropogenic climate change published since the early 2000s, a body of work large enough to constitute, in his account, a distinct and internally differentiated literary field rather than a passing thematic trend (Trexler, 2015). Yet the earliest and still most influential critical intervention in this field, Amitav Ghosh's The Great Derangement, argued that serious literary fiction had, until quite recently, been peculiarly unable to accommodate climate change at all: the genre conventions of realist probability, Ghosh contends, treat the improbable, extreme weather events that increasingly define daily experience as material properly belonging to science fiction rather than to literary fiction, producing what he terms a collective imaginative "derangement" in the face of the crisis (Ghosh, 2016).

This article argues that the period since Ghosh's diagnosis has seen climate fiction develop a set of formal strategies that directly answer it — not by making climate change more probable-seeming within realist convention, but by reorganising narrative form itself around the psychological structure of trauma. Where early climate fiction, in Trexler's taxonomy, tended to represent environmental crisis as an external plot event — a flood, a drought, a migration precipitated by disaster — more recent fiction increasingly stages climate change as an internal, structuring condition: a derangement not merely of climate but of narrative time, voice, and scale. This shift is best understood, this article contends, through the vocabulary of trauma theory, and specifically through E. Ann Kaplan's concept of climate-specific "Pretraumatic Stress Disorder," which inverts the retrospective temporal structure of classical trauma theory to describe a dread oriented toward a catastrophe not yet fully arrived (Kaplan, 2015).

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The argument proceeds in three movements. It first establishes a theoretical framework linking ecocriticism's account of the climate novel to the vocabulary of trauma studies, via Rob Nixon's "slow violence" and Glenn Albrecht's "solastalgia." It then reads this framework across five recent novels chosen for their formal, rather than merely thematic, engagement with climate trauma: Jenny Offill's *Weather* (2020), Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018), Omar El Akkad's *American War* (2017), Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019), and Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* (2020). It concludes by arguing that the most significant development in the contemporary climate novel is not thematic but formal: an increasing willingness to let narrative structure itself — fragmentation, non-human duration, anticipatory address — carry the psychological weight that plot alone cannot.

Theoretical Framework: From Ecocriticism to Climate Trauma

Adeline Johns-Putra's Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel situates the genre's development within a broader crisis of representation: climate change, operating across timescales and spatial scales that exceed ordinary human perception, resists the individualised, human-centred plot structures on which the novel as a form has historically depended (Johns-Putra, 2019). Trexler's earlier survey had already identified this representational difficulty as constitutive of the genre, proposing the concept of "eco-nomics" to describe how climate novels must continually renegotiate the boundary between ecological process and economic and political system in order to render climate change narratively legible at all (Trexler, 2015). Both critics agree that the climate novel is, in this sense, a genre defined less by a stable set of conventions than by a shared formal problem: how to narrate a crisis whose primary characteristics — gradual onset, diffuse causation, delayed consequence — actively resist the conventions of dramatic, humanly-scaled narrative.

Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" names this same representational difficulty from an environmental-justice rather than a narratological angle. Slow violence, in Nixon's formulation, is violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, an attritional violence of delayed effect that is not typically recognised as violence at all because it is not spectacular, not instantaneous, and not confined to a single, visible event (Nixon, 2011). Nixon's account is significant for climate fiction criticism because it identifies precisely the temporal structure that trauma theory, in its classical form, was developed to describe: an event whose full impact is not available to consciousness at the moment of its occurrence, and which therefore cannot be straightforwardly narrated as a discrete, locatable incident.

Cathy Caruth's foundational account of trauma in *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) formalises this structure. For Caruth, trauma is constituted not by an event itself but by the mind's failure to fully register that event as it occurs; the traumatic experience becomes, in her phrase, "unclaimed," persisting in latency and returning belatedly through fragments, repetitions, and intrusive images rather than through coherent, linear memory (Caruth, 1996). This model — trauma as belated, retrospective, structured around a gap between event and understanding — has provided the dominant vocabulary for literary trauma studies since the mid-1990s. E. Ann Kaplan's Climate Trauma proposes a crucial inversion of this model specifically for the climate context. Examining dystopian film and fiction that imagine catastrophic climate futures, Kaplan argues that such texts produce not retrospective but anticipatory trauma — a psychological condition she terms "Pretraumatic Stress Disorder," in which dread is oriented toward a future catastrophe that has not yet occurred but is apprehended, through repeated exposure to climate science and its dystopian cultural representations, with the same affective intensity as a remembered traumatic event (Kaplan, 2015). Where Caruth's subject is haunted by an unassimilated past, Kaplan's is haunted by an unassimilated future — a structure of feeling this article argues is increasingly legible in the formal choices of contemporary climate fiction.

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Solastalgia and the Psychopathology of Place

Glenn Albrecht's concept of "solastalgia" supplies a further, complementary vocabulary. Coined in 2005 from observations of the psychological distress experienced by residents of the Upper Hunter Valley, New South Wales, as open-cut coal mining transformed their home landscape, solastalgia names "the homesickness you have when you are still at home" — a grief produced not by displacement from a place but by the transformation of a place one has not left (Albrecht, 2005). Unlike nostalgia, which mourns a place left behind, solastalgia mourns a place still inhabited but no longer recognisable, and Albrecht explicitly frames it as one of several "psychoterratic" or earth-related mental health conditions arising from humanity's changing relationship to environment.

Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* (2012), set among Appalachian tobacco farmers whose hillside is unexpectedly colonised by a vast, climate-disrupted overwintering population of monarch butterflies, dramatizes solastalgia with unusual precision: the novel's protagonist, Dellarobia Turnbow, experiences the butterflies' arrival first as a numinous, quasi-religious vision and only later, as visiting scientists explain the disrupted migratory pattern behind it, as evidence that her own familiar landscape has become unmoored from the seasonal patterns on which her community's agricultural life depends. The novel's slow revelation — wonder giving way to scientific dread — formally reproduces the belated structure Caruth associates with trauma, while its setting among a rural community whose economic and psychological security is bound to a specific, threatened landscape stages solastalgia as a communal rather than merely individual condition.

Kingsolver's novel is instructive for this article's broader argument because it locates climate trauma at the intersection of ecological and economic precarity: Dellarobia's family's tobacco farm is already financially failing before the butterflies arrive, and the media attention the insects attract exposes the family, and the wider community, to a form of scrutiny — climate scientists, journalists, environmentalists — that many residents experience as a further, class-inflected dispossession layered atop the ecological one. This doubling of ecological and economic vulnerability anticipates Nixon's insistence that slow violence falls disproportionately on populations already marginalised by poverty and geographic isolation, and it complicates any reading of solastalgia as a purely psychological or aesthetic response to landscape change, insisting instead on its material, class-specific dimensions (Nixon, 2011; Albrecht, 2005).

Narrative Fragmentation as Formal Trauma: Jenny Offill's *Weather*

If Flight Behavior stages solastalgia at the level of plot, Jenny Offill's *Weather* (2020) enacts climate trauma at the level of form. The novel is composed almost entirely of short, aphoristic fragments — diary entries, overheard remarks, half-finished thoughts — attributed to Lizzie, a university librarian who takes on a side job answering listener mail for a friend's climate-doom podcast and finds her own daily consciousness increasingly colonised by climate anxiety. Recent scholarship reading the novel through an affective and emotional-geography lens argues that this fragmentary form is not merely a stylistic choice but a deliberate formal enactment of climate anxiety itself: Hassan and Tayib's 2025 study of the novel's "emotional geographies" argues that *Weather's* structure externalises the destabilised, interrupted quality of consciousness under conditions of solastalgia and climate dread, such that the reader experiences something structurally analogous to the disorientation the narrator describes (Hassan & Tayib, 2025).

Marco Caracciolo's account of what he calls "short forms for eco-anxiety" situates *Weather* within a broader tendency in contemporary fiction to use brevity and fragmentation as a form of "cognitive realism": rather than building toward a single, climactic traumatic event in the manner of a conventional plot, these short forms mimic the diffuse, low-grade, chronically anxious quality of living with the knowledge of slow, ongoing planetary harm, in which — as Caracciolo notes, drawing on Anthony Giddens's concept of ontological security — climate change threatens not

ISSN: **3139-0854**

a single catastrophic loss but the background sense of stability against which ordinary life is lived (Caracciolo, 2025). Sylvia Mayer's comparative reading of *Weather* alongside Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* identifies a countervailing tendency within the novel's fragmentation, however: what Mayer terms an "angry optimism" and "utopian minimalism," in which Lizzie's cultivation of small, sustaining domestic and communal practices — tending a garden, maintaining friendships — offers a modest counter-structure to climate dread without resolving it into false comfort (Mayer, 2025). Weather thus stages Pretraumatic Stress Disorder, in Kaplan's sense, not through dystopian spectacle but through the accretion of fragmentary unease across hundreds of brief passages, none individually catastrophic, whose cumulative effect is a portrait of chronic anticipatory dread.

Deep Time and Arboreal Consciousness: Richard Powers's *The Overstory*

Richard Powers's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Overstory* (2018) approaches the same representational problem — how to narrate a crisis operating on non-human timescales — through a different formal strategy: radical temporal and perspectival expansion. The novel interweaves nine human protagonists whose lives are each, in different ways, shaped by an encounter with trees, against a narrative backdrop that repeatedly gestures toward tree-time: centuries- and millennia-long processes of growth, communication, and forest succession that dwarf any single human life. Johns-Putra's account of the contemporary climate novel identifies this kind of scalar dilation — the attempt to render intelligible processes that exceed an individual human lifespan — as one of the genre's central formal challenges, and *The Overstory's* structure, in which human plots are persistently interrupted and reframed by passages narrating arboreal processes on a vastly different timescale, can be read as a direct formal response to that challenge (Johns-Putra, 2019).

This scalar strategy has direct implications for how the novel represents trauma. Because deforestation and old-growth logging are narrated partly from a perspective that is, however metaphorically, attentive to non-human duration, the novel's human characters experience ecological loss not as a single traumatic event but as a slow violence, in Nixon's sense, whose full magnitude only becomes legible once the reader has been trained, over hundreds of pages, to perceive tree-time as consequential in its own right. The activist characters' escalating, ultimately self-destructive commitment to forest defence dramatizes a form of anticipatory trauma congruent with Kaplan's Pretraumatic Stress Disorder: their dread is oriented not toward a loss they have already suffered but toward an old-growth ecosystem's future annihilation, apprehended with the same urgency as a remembered catastrophe precisely because the novel has spent so much of its length making non-human duration emotionally legible to the reader.

Slow Violence and Racialized Climate Trauma: Omar El Akkad's *American War*

Omar El Akkad's American War (2017) relocates climate trauma to a near-future United States riven by a second civil war precipitated in part by a federal ban on fossil fuels and the coastal flooding that has already redrawn the national map. The novel follows Sarat Chestnut from childhood in a refugee camp through her eventual radicalisation into a suicide bomber, and critics reading the novel through Nixon's slow-violence framework have emphasised how El Akkad displaces the conventional climate-disaster spectacle — the flood itself occurs largely offstage, in the novel's prehistory — onto the slower, more attritional violence of displacement, camp life, and radicalisation that follows it. This structural choice enacts Nixon's central claim that slow violence is characteristically invisible to conventional narrative and media attention precisely because it lacks a single, photographable moment of impact (Nixon, 2011).

The novel's trauma structure is doubly anticipatory in Kaplan's sense: it is set in an imagined future that functions, for the contemporary reader, as a Pretraumatic scenario of national climate catastrophe, while within the novel's own timeline Sarat's childhood in the refugee camp is itself

ISSN: **3139-0854**

saturated with anticipatory dread about a war whose worst violence is still to come. By locating its protagonist's radicalisation not in a single traumatic incident but in years of accumulated, low-grade humiliation and deprivation within the camp, American War formally enacts Nixon's argument that slow violence produces its most consequential effects cumulatively, in ways that resist the discrete, climactic trauma-event structure of conventional war narrative — even as the novel's explicit subject is a war fought with all the spectacular violence of conventional armed conflict.

Postcolonial Water and the Unthinkable: Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*

Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* (2019), published three years after *The Great Derangement*, can be read as Ghosh's attempt to write the kind of climate fiction his earlier nonfiction argued the literary novel had been unable to produce. The novel follows Deen Datta, a Bengali-American rare-book dealer, as he traces a seventeenth-century legend about a merchant fleeing a vengeful snake goddess across the Sundarbans, Venice, and Los Angeles, encountering along the way climate-displaced migrants, a Sundarbans wildfire, tornado-force waterspouts, and a mass die-off of marine life — precisely the kind of "improbable" events that *The Great Derangement* had argued realist fiction habitually excludes (Ghosh, 2016). The novel's deliberate accumulation of such events, presented without the ironic distancing that might mark them as magical realism, constitutes a formal argument against the derangement Ghosh had diagnosed: climate change, the novel insists through its own structure, is not too improbable for serious fiction but has simply not yet been granted a narrative form equal to it.

Gun Island's Sundarbans setting also connects the novel directly to the postcolonial dimension of Nixon's slow-violence argument, which insists that the communities least responsible for carbon emissions — among them the climate refugees of the Bengal delta, one of the region's most acutely threatened by sea-level rise — bear its slowest, least visible, and least internationally attended violence (Nixon, 2011). By tracing his migrant characters' journey from the Sundarbans through the Mediterranean migration route to Venice, itself threatened by rising seas, Ghosh formally links the slow violence of delta erosion to the more visible, mediatised violence of the European migration crisis, insisting on a causal continuity between the two that conventional, regionally bounded climate reporting tends to obscure.

The novel's recourse to a centuries-old legend, rather than to a purely contemporary realist idiom, is itself a formal argument about climate trauma's temporality. By framing present-day ecological collapse as the recurrence of a much older story — the same vengeful, displaced power reappearing across four centuries in altered form — *Gun Island* suggests that climate trauma is not a wholly novel psychological condition invented by the Anthropocene but a contemporary intensification of a much longer history of extraction, displacement, and dispossession, echoing Nixon's insistence that slow violence has deep colonial and imperial roots rather than being a purely contemporary phenomenon (Nixon, 2011). This layering of legend and reportage also allows Ghosh to stage precisely the "improbable" coincidences — characters and events recurring across centuries and continents — that The Great Derangement argues realist fiction has trained readers to distrust, turning the novel's own narrative structure into a direct rebuttal of the derangement it names.

Anticipatory Trauma and Utopian Resistance: Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*

Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* (2020) opens with one of the most direct enactments of climate trauma in recent fiction: a near-future Indian heatwave, narrated from within, that kills millions, including nearly everyone in the town where the novel's sole survivor-narrator, Frank May, has been volunteering. This opening chapter functions as precisely the kind of Pretraumatic scenario. Kaplan's framework describes — a catastrophe not yet arrived for the reader, but rendered with the sensory and psychological intensity of remembered trauma, engineered to produce dread oriented toward the future rather than

ISSN: 3139-0854

grief oriented toward the past (Kaplan, 2015). Frank's subsequent, novel-spanning post-traumatic stress, including a kidnapping he undertakes as a delayed, displaced response to his own survivor guilt, then folds Kaplan's anticipatory, pretraumatic structure back into a more conventional, Caruthian retrospective trauma narrative, staging within a single character arc the article's central theoretical claim that contemporary climate fiction moves fluidly between anticipatory and retrospective trauma temporalities.

What distinguishes Robinson's novel within this article's corpus is its subsequent refusal to remain within a purely traumatic register. Mayer's account of the novel's "angry optimism," developed initially in relation to *Weather*, applies with equal force to Ministry, whose sprawling, multi-perspectival structure — encompassing geoengineering schemes, central-bank carbon currencies, and eco-terrorism alongside Frank's personal trauma — insists that anticipatory dread can motivate collective political action rather than only paralysis (Mayer, 2025). In this respect the novel offers a formal counterpoint to the more contained, interiorised trauma structures of Weather and American War: where those novels largely stage climate trauma as a condition to be inhabited, Ministry stages it as a condition to be organised against, without thereby minimising the reality of the trauma its opening chapter so viscerally establishes.

The Ecological Uncanny: Jeff Vander Meer's *Annihilation*

Jeff Vander Meer's Annihilation (2014), the first volume of the Southern Reach trilogy, approaches climate trauma through a register closer to horror than to realism, following an unnamed biologist into Area X, a coastal wilderness in which ecological boundaries — between species, between self and environment, between organic and inorganic matter — have begun to dissolve in ways neither the novel's characters nor its readers can fully explain. Siobhan Carroll's influential reading of the trilogy situates this dissolution within what she terms the "ecological uncanny": a mode in which nature, no longer legible as an external realm separate from human society, becomes instead an unheimlich, unmasterable presence that has effectively absorbed the human observers sent to study it, producing dread not through any single monstrous event but through the sustained, low-grade horror of a world whose fundamental categories can no longer be trusted (Carroll, 2015).

This uncanny register bears directly on the article's trauma-theoretical framework. Freud's own account of the uncanny, on which Carroll's reading implicitly draws, describes the return of something at once intimately familiar and radically estranged — a structure closely allied to Caruth's account of trauma as the belated, unassimilated return of an event that was never fully processed as it occurred (Caruth, 1996). *Annihilation's* biologist narrator, whose journal-entry narration becomes increasingly fragmented and unreliable as Area X reshapes her own body and perception, stages this belated, intrusive return formally: readers experience Area X's transformation of the biologist gradually, through textual gaps and displaced description, rather than through a single legible event, so that the novel's horror is inseparable from its narrative form. Where Powers renders non-human duration intelligible through expansive, centuries-spanning narration, Vander Meer withholds intelligibility altogether, suggesting that one formal response available to climate trauma fiction is not to explain the non-human world's temporality and agency but to let the reader share the characters' own epistemological disorientation in the face of it.

Discussion: From Representation to Affective Infrastructure

Read together, these six novels suggest that the most significant development in contemporary climate fiction is not primarily thematic — the presence or absence of storms, floods, and droughts — but formal: a shift from using narrative to represent environmental crisis as an external event toward using narrative structure itself as what might be called affective infrastructure, a formal architecture engineered to produce in the reader something structurally analogous to the trauma the text describes. Offill's fragmentation, Powers's scalar dilation, El Akkad's displacement of spectacle onto

ISSN: **3139-0854**

slow violence, Ghosh's accumulation of the "improbable," Robinson's oscillation between anticipatory and retrospective trauma registers, and Vander Meer's ecological uncanny are formally distinct strategies addressed to a common problem: how to narrate a crisis whose defining features — gradual onset, diffuse causation, non-human timescale, delayed and unevenly distributed consequence — exceed the individualised, event-centred structures on which the novel has historically relied (Johns-Putra, 2019; Trexler, 2015).

This formal shift also has implications for how climate fiction relates to the trauma-theory tradition from which it borrows. Kaplan's Pretraumatic Stress Disorder was developed primarily through readings of dystopian film, and this article's readings suggest that literary fiction has, in the years since Climate Trauma's publication, developed formal resources — fragmentation, scalar dilation, the strategic withholding and displacement of spectacle — considerably more varied than the visual dystopia Kaplan's corpus emphasises. Where Caruth's classical model locates trauma in a gap between an unassimilated past event and its belated narration, and Kaplan's model relocates that gap to an unassimilated future, the novels examined here suggest that contemporary climate fiction increasingly refuses to locate trauma in a single temporal direction at all, instead constructing narrative structures — Robinson's oscillating registers, Powers's interwoven human and arboreal timescales — in which anticipatory and retrospective trauma continually fold into one another, formally enacting Nixon's claim that slow violence resists the discrete, locatable temporality on which both classical trauma theory and conventional narrative structure have historically depended (Nixon, 2011; Caruth, 1996).

Conclusion

This article has argued that contemporary climate fiction has moved beyond the representational problem Amitav Ghosh identified in *The Great Derangement* — the felt improbability of climate catastrophe within realist convention — by developing formal strategies that stage climate trauma directly, rather than merely narrating environmental crisis as plot. Jenny Offill's fragmentary aphorisms, Richard Powers's arboreal deep time, Omar El Akkad's displaced spectacle, Amitav Ghosh's own accumulation of the improbable, Kim Stanley Robinson's oscillation between anticipatory and retrospective trauma registers, and Jeff VanderMeer's ecological uncanny together suggest that the climate novel's most significant recent development lies not in subject matter but in its formal reorganisation of narrative time, voice, and scale around the psychological structure that E. Ann Kaplan calls Pretraumatic Stress Disorder and that Cathy Caruth's and Rob Nixon's work helps situate within the longer history of trauma theory and environmental-justice criticism. As climate change continues to reshape the material conditions under which fiction is written and read, this formal turn from crisis to trauma is likely to intensify rather than recede, and future scholarship in this field would do well to attend as closely to how contemporary novels are structured as to what, thematically, they describe.

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