



THE FUTURE WE WANT: CLIMATE CHANGE

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SOME THINGS TO THINK ABOUT BEFORE YOU START WRITING...

A matter of urgency

By now, it is now widely acknowledged that the climate crisis poses an urgent threat to the existence of societies and ecosystems around the world. In 2018, the IPCC published a report stating that human beings only had 12 years left in which to avoid catastrophic climate breakdown. Many highly successful activist campaigns around the world have contributed and responded to a shift in public consciousness about environmental issues, including the youth-led Fridays4Future initiated by Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, the global Extinction Rebellion movement, and the many protests and acts of resistance that occur on the frontlines of climate change, which are vitally important though often less visible in the mainstream media of the Global North. The United Kingdom has officially declared a state of climate emergency, along with hundreds of other countries, cities and administrations.

But the response from governments has been a remarkably late one, considering that since the 1960s scientists have warned against the accumulation of CO₂ in our atmosphere as a result of human activity, and that some even predicted the possible harmful effects of greenhouse gases [as early as the late 19th century](#).

Why has it taken us so long to act? The answer to this is largely due to the incredible amount of money and power concentrated in the big oil industry, [with just 100 companies \(including ExxonMobil, BP, Rio Tinto and others\) responsible for 71% of all global emissions](#). These companies have poured [enormous amounts of money](#) into lobbying governments and spreading false information to ensure that we'll be tied to fossil fuels for as long as possible.

But 'telling the truth' about the climate – though an urgent requirement – is not straightforward.

Climate change is a highly complex issue that requires us to entirely rethink our relationships with the planet and with each other. By writing about the climate crisis in new and innovative ways, we might start to think more creatively about how to tackle it.

Climate Change is 'a wicked problem'

Researchers who study public perceptions of climate change often refer to climate change as a 'wicked problem', which means it touches on a huge array of issues and is therefore difficult to address. Rather than being a single problem with a single straightforward solution, it requires a huge diversity of responses, both local and global. Having been long thought of as simply a 'scientific' issue, it is now recognized equally as a political, social, economic and cultural issue.

Because the factors driving climate change are so wide-ranging, thinking properly about the climate crisis requires us to consider almost *everything at once*, on scales ranging from the minute to the global. Take, for example, the mundane act of turning on a lamp. To think about the relationship of this action to climate change, we need to think about not only the amount of energy the lamp is using, but where that energy comes from (is it from a coal-powered station? Where is the power station located and what is its impact on the surrounding local environment? Where does the coal used to generate the power come from and who will profit from its combustion?). We need to think about where the materials in the lamp were sourced (was the tungsten in the bulb mined overseas? Has this mine contaminated the local environment or displaced communities? Has the presence of the mining industry exacerbated social or political tensions?), as well as where the lamp itself was produced (is it factory-made? What kind of working conditions are its makers subject to? How much energy was consumed by the process of its production?) and what will happen when the lamp eventually breaks (will it

go into landfill? Will the waste be sent somewhere else? What ecosystems or communities might be impacted by its disposal?). It is hard enough to *think* about this much complexity, let alone write about it.

Interconnectedness, not universality

Another reason that climate change is a complex issue is because it means vastly different things for different people, and operates on many different timescales at once. It's true that climate change will affect us all, but it's not true that it will affect us all equally. This means that even the IPCC stating that we have 12 years to prevent climate breakdown is problematic: it creates the sense of a clear cut 'moment' at some point in the future when 'the end of the world' will begin. We have to ask ourselves the question: whose world are we talking about?

Climate change tends to worsen existing inequality, which means that it needs to be thought of in conjunction with intersectionality. Women of colour who are poorer are more likely to be hit harder, and earlier, by climate change than rich white men. Geographic location is an important factor: those living in the Global South are already feeling the effects of climate change whereas climate breakdown in the Global North tends to be slower and more mild, but geographic location isn't the end of the story. Two people living in the same city might have vastly different experiences of a heatwave, for example, if one lives in a spacious air-conditioned house and the other lives in a high-rise with no air conditioning. The devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans in 2005, where decades of racist policy had afforded flood protection to white neighbourhoods when no such protection for Black neighbourhoods, is a good example of how environmental problems highlight and worsen inequality. Another contemporary example is the fact that Black and working class communities who are forced to live in closer proximity to busy motorways are more exposed to the risk of air pollution, and thus have been harder hit by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Thinking about climate change productively, therefore, remains remembering that it unfolds in complex and diverse ways, rather than occurring as a single event at a single point in history. Our experiences of climate change are all interconnected but not universal.

The concept of environmental justice aims to address this set of issues by thinking of climate change as inextricably entangled with

colonialism, structural inequality and patterns of global exploitation ([see here for the original 17 principles of environmental justice, drafted at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991](#)).

TELLING THE STORY OF THE CLIMATE

The complexity of climate change is part of the reason that creativity has such an important role to play in the way we respond, adapt and transform our societies within the context of the climate crisis. Stories are *good* at dealing with complexity, and at connecting abstract notions and philosophical ideas with every-day, bodily experience. Creative writing can illuminate interior lives alongside external circumstances. It can represent events unfolding on different timescales, depict the way in which the global and the local interact, and allow us to empathize with experiences that are different to our own.

Increasingly, climate change is becoming the subject of creative work. A genre of writing has emerged called 'Cli-Fi' (short for 'Climate Fiction', a play on the genre of 'Sci-Fi'). Novels such as Margaret Atwoods *MaddAdam* trilogy, for example, conjure dystopian worlds based on real predictions of what the world might look like in the future, with heatwaves, chaotic weather patterns, disastrous biodiversity loss, food shortages, mass migration, conflict and the increased militarization of nation states.

But while these threats may be very real, dystopian fiction is not the only way to write about climate change. In his book *The Great Derangement*, writer Amitav Ghosh says we need more writing about the climate that isn't just a set of 'disaster stories set in the future'. He calls for more writing rooted in the present that addresses the weird, concrete and intimate ways in which climate change affects individual lives. As an example, he gives a vivid account of his own experience of a cyclone in Mumbai. Events such as these, he says, are already 'stranger than fiction' – they hardly need dystopian embellishment.

Other books, such as Richard Powers' *The Overstory*, contrast human timescales with environmental ones. The novel touches on many issues that are thoroughly interconnected with climate change (colonialism, industrialization, war, neoliberalism and the rise of Silicon Valley) but grounds itself in the everyday emotional lives of specific human characters. Each story is disconnected from the previous one, except for the fact that trees are central in all of them.

The long lives of the trees (often centuries in length) are contrasted with the much shorter lives of the human characters, who have only fleeting insights into the global patterns and deep histories to which they belong.

Writing about the climate, therefore, can take many forms. Surprisingly, very few authors so far have tried to write about the future of our planet from a positive perspective: the way things could be if we ramped up the global effort to combat climate change. Stories can be incredible powerful in helping us visualize alternate models: in fact, it's almost impossible for us to create the kind of world we want *without* first telling the story of what it would look like. Will the next generation of writers take up this challenge?

TIPS FOR WRITING ABOUT THE CLIMATE

Keep it local

Climate change does not look the same for everyone, everywhere. It varies greatly from place to place. And no one experiences climate change as a 'global issue' - we all experience it as a serious of changes, disruptions and reconfigurations in our immediate surroundings. It's also very likely that combatting and adapting to the climate crisis will involve lots of little solutions as well as global ones, for example: communities that grow their own food, produce their own energy and share resources. A question to ask yourself might be: what might your community look like in a world that has successfully adapted to climate change? How would your relationship to the things, people and animals around you have changed?

Look for intersections with other injustices

Remember that climate change doesn't affect everyone equally, and tends to worsen existing inequalities, think about ways in which climate change might intersect with other issues that are important to you. Many have written about how the climate crisis [exacerbates social inequality](#), as well as ways in which it disproportionately effects [indigenous populations](#), [people of colour](#), people with disabilities and [women](#) around the world.

The flip side of this is that many of these groups are leading the way on climate policy with incredible strength and resilience, so you might focus on this resistance rather than on a story of disempowerment alone. If you're inclined to write a positive vision of the future you might even describe a world in which combatting the climate

crisis has also entailed building a society that is anti-racist, anti-colonial, non-patriarchal, non-discriminatory and egalitarian.

Consider the non-human

We can't think about climate change without thinking about ecology and the dynamic, interconnected processes that sustain life on earth. Paying attention to non-human characters, such as trees, rocks, rivers, birds, beetles, mushrooms, earthworms and soil, can help us think of the ways in which our lives as humans exist within natural processes, rather than standing apart from them. This kind of thinking also has rich philosophical potential, and might even lead us to potential solutions: what do we have to learn, for example, from the way a forest works - where all matter is recycled, where different species support each other in synergistic relationships and where diversity is key to the survival of the forest as a whole? As a creative experiment, try paying attention to the ecological processes you come across in your day-to-day life. Think about the life-span of the moth that dies gets trapped in your bathroom, or the relationship between the plants in your garden and the snails eating them, or try to imagine what could be going through the mind of the fox who rummages around in your garbage.

READING AND WATCHING LIST

NON-FICTION:

- The Great Derangement - Amitav Ghosh
- Farming While Black: Soul Fire Farm's Practical Guide to Liberation on the Land - Leah Penniman
- The Second Body - Daily Hildyard
- This Changes Everything and On Fire - Naomi Klein
- [As Long As Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice, from Colonization to Standing Rock](#), by Dina Gilio-Whitaker
- Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor - Rob Nixon

POETRY:

- Fire Front: First Nations Poetry and Power Today - ed. Alison Whittaker
- The Future Keepers - Nandi Chinna
- Here: Poems for the Planet - ed. Elizabeth J Coleman
- Now You Care - Di Brant



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FICTION:

- The MaddAdam Trilogy - Margaret Atwood
- Flight Behaviour - Barbara Kingsolver
- Barkskins - Annie Proulx
- The Swan Book – Alexis Wright
- The Overstory – Richard Powers
- The Wall - John Lanchester
- Cygnet - Season Butler
- Who Fears Death - Nnedi Okorafor
- Moss Witch and Other Stories - Sara Maitland

FILM:

- Purple - John Akomfrah
- Beasts of the Southern Wild - Benh Zeitlin
- [Wakening](#) - Danis Goulet

MAGAZINES/JOURNALS:

- [Uneven Earth](#)
- [Its Freezing in LA](#)

PEOPLE TO FOLLOW

Amitav Ghosh - [@GhoshAmitav](#)

Emily Atkin - [@Emorwee](#)

Eric Holthaus - [@EricHolthaus](#)

Isra Hirsi - [@israhirsi](#)

Jamie Margolin - [@Jamie_Margolin](#)

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SOME KEY TERMS

Anthropocene: The Anthropocene is the idea that the Earth is entering a new epoch in its geological history, in which human beings have for the first time become the primary agents of change on a planetary scale. This gives the new epoch its name. Anthropocene is derived from the Greek for 'human' and stands alongside other geological epochs, such as the Holocene which began at the end of the last Ice Age around twelve thousand years ago. [source: <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/what-is-the-anthropocene>]

Carbon Neutrality (also Net Zero or Zero Carbon): Carbon neutrality, or having a net zero carbon footprint, refers to achieving net zero carbon dioxide emissions by balancing carbon emissions with carbon removal (often through carbon offsetting) or simply eliminating carbon emissions altogether (the transition to a "post-carbon economy"). [source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carbon_neutrality]

Circular Economy: The circular economy is an all-encompassing approach to life and business where everything has value and nothing is wasted. In simple terms, it can be explained as 'make, use, remake' as opposed to 'make, use, dispose'. [source: <https://www.zerowastescotland.org.uk/circular-economy/definition>]

Climate Justice: Climate Justice means addressing the climate crisis whilst also making progress towards equity and the protection and realisation of human rights. [source: <http://www.foeurope.org/climate-justice-in-depth>]

Environmental Racism: Environmental racism refers to the institutional rules, regulations, policies or government and/or corporate decisions that deliberately target certain communities for locally undesirable land uses and lax enforcement of zoning and environmental laws, resulting in communities being disproportionately exposed to toxic and hazardous waste based upon race. [Source: <http://greenaction.org/what-is-environmental-justice/>]

Extractivism: Extractivism is the process of extracting natural resources from the Earth to sell on the world market. It exists in an economy that depends primarily on the extraction or removal of natural resources that are considered valuable for exportation worldwide. [Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Extractivism>]

Geoengineering: Geoengineering refers to technological interventions to forestall catastrophic global warming. [...] Typically what people call geoengineering is divided into two major classes. There are approaches which attempt to reduce the amount of climate change produced by an increase in greenhouse gas concentrations and there are approaches that try to remove greenhouse gases that have already been released to the atmosphere. [Source: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/geoengineering-and-climate-change/>]

IPCC: IPCC is the acronym for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. First set up in 1988 under two UN organizations, the IPCC surveys the research on climate change happening all around the world and reports to the public about the current state of our scientific knowledge. [source: <https://www.climaterealityproject.org/blog/key-terms-you-need-understand-climate-change>]

Shifting baseline syndrome: Shifting baseline syndrome is the situation in which over time knowledge is lost about the state of the natural world, because people don't perceive changes that are actually taking place. In this way, people's perceptions of change are out of kilter with the actual changes taking place in the environment [source: <https://news.mongabay.com/2009/06/proving-the-shifting-baselines-theory-how-humans-consistently-misperceive-nature/>]

Solastalgia: an existential melancholia experienced with the negative transformation (desolation) of a loved home environment... Solastalgia, simply put, is "the homesickness you have when you are still at home".

[source: <https://theconversation.com/the-age-of-solastalgia-8337>]

THE ORWELL YOUTH PRIZE

WHO WE ARE: The Orwell Youth Prize is an annual programme for 12-18-year olds culminating in a writing prize. Rooted in Orwell's values of integrity and fairness, the prize and the activities around it introduce young people to the power of language and provoke them to think critically and creatively about the world in which they are living. With a focus on social justice, the themes of the Youth Prize ask young people to respond to big ideas. We believe increasing young people's confidence in writing, critical thinking and interest in social justice helps to equip them for their next step, whether that be higher education, apprenticeships or work.

OUR MISSION: We are a small charity with big ambitions. We seek to amplify the voices that go unheard and in doing so give young people the tools, confidence and platform to make an impact and change the world around them.

SUPPORT THE YOUTH PRIZE: As a small charity we are always keen to build our network of supporters. If you are interested in getting involved in the Youth Prize or finding out more please get in touch with Programme Manager Alex Talbott - alexalbott@orwellyouthprize.co.uk



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