

Fantastic Futures? Cli-fi, Climate Justice, and Queer Futurity

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# Fantastic Futures?

Cli-fi, Climate Justice, and Queer Futurity

REBECCA EVANS

For me, the best of cli-fi does two things: it delivers a powerful and emotional story and it pushes the reader to wake up to the existential threat that man-made global warming poses to future generations. So good cli-fi is both a great read and a call to action, either direct or indirect. If it doesn't wake us up, it's just escapist entertainment. I am not interested anymore in escapism.

Dan Bloom, "Q&A"

## Cli-Fi, Sci-Fi, and Their Disreputable Others

[Science fiction] is an educational literature. . . . It demands . . . that the critic be a Darwinist and not a medicine man.

Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*

Environmentalism has an intimate relationship to extrapolation; the basic project of sustainability requires at least an imaginative extension into the future one hopes to sustain. Often, this link is eagerly supplied by environmental narrative; as Brent Bellamy and Imre Szeman put it, "ecology in general has become so closely linked to narratives of the future that even to draw attention to this link between the environment and what-is-yet-to-come can seem beside the point or even tautological."<sup>1</sup> In the shadow of the still-unfolding event of global warming, cli-fi, or climate change fiction, has emerged as a touchstone in climate change discourse, a genre that seems capable of anticipating and articulating future prospects of a warming world.

Coined, and energetically promoted, by journalist Dan Bloom, the term “cli-fi” has recently begun to garner a great deal of critical and popular attention, with more and more texts referred to as cli-fi and that label gaining more and more credence. Cli-fi has been hailed for making otherwise-difficult-to-interpret data about the future legible to its audience; as an influential article about the genre published in *Dissent* in 2013 argues, by “translating graphs and scientific jargon into experience and emotion,” works of cli-fi help to “refashion myths for our age.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, cli-fi is often claimed as a privileged genre for fashioning environmental futures.

This essay seeks to add new dimensions to current critical understandings of cli-fi’s relationship to environmental futurity. It suggests that cli-fi is not in fact a coherent genre but rather a literary preoccupation with climate futures that draws from a wide range of popular genres. The critical response to cli-fi has thus far generically *flattened* the term, emphasizing its association with the realistic literary strategies commonly associated with scientific knowledge while excluding other genres. Yet a more nuanced account of cli-fi’s generic constitution reveals new aspects of the relationship between cli-fi and ecological futurity. Indeed, cli-fi’s use of multiple genres is an integral part of the way it narratively conjures the future—a conjuring that inflects the representation of climate justice and the queer politics of futurity itself. This is to say that the implications of how different genres articulate climate change are twofold. First, representations of climate futures matter in terms of climate justice, or the effort to combat the way that climate change is disproportionately caused and disproportionately experienced along lines of privilege. Climate justice narratives thus require an attention both to the likelihood of climate injustice in the future *and* to the way that such injustice is rooted, and indeed ongoing, in the present moment. Second, representations of climate futures matter in terms of resisting heteronormative systems, or the vexed relationship that queer scholarship has identified between futurity and reproductive politics. Queer climate narratives thus require sensitivity to the heteronormative values that often undergird accounts of our ethical relationship to the future. As a literary genre defined by its interest in ecological futures, cli-fi, and its relationships to climate justice and to queer temporality, is ripe for such investigation.

I begin this essay by exploring the corpus and reception of “cli-fi.”

I then compare that reception to critical histories of science fiction, showing how troubling assumptions about the relative merit of different genres echo across these fields. Next, I offer a reading of David Mitchell's 2014 novel, *The Bone Clocks*, which I argue is exemplary of the mixed-genre nature of cli-fi. In my reading of Mitchell's novel, I suggest that different genres coexist within cli-fi and are best seen as *cooperating* in the literary production of ecological futurity while discussing the political stakes of fantasy in *The Bone Clocks*. On one hand, I argue, Mitchell's integration of fantasy allows him to add crucial supplements to his realistic representation of climate justice. On the other hand, Mitchell's fantasy plot underscores the heteronormative politics of what Lee Edelman calls "reproductive futurity." Each of these insights reverberates beyond the realm of cli-fi to the extraliterary forms of climate change discourse that draw on similar rhetorical structures to invoke the future. I ultimately argue that cli-fi's generic expansiveness conditions its construction of ecological futures and the way that climate justice and queer politics are enhanced, or obscured, in the representation of those futures.

Like the Anthropocene, cli-fi, defined as literary works that describe the impact of anthropogenic climate change, existed before it was named. In some cli-fi, climate change serves as or motivates the primary plot. For instance, Kim Stanley Robinson's *Science in the Capital* trilogy describes the geopolitical transformations prompted by catastrophic climate events, and Ian McEwan's *Solar* follows a scientist working on solar energy. In other works, such as Octavia Butler's *Parable* series and Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy, climate change operates in the background of character-driven plotlines. In other cases, climate change operates across background and foreground, interacting with individualized plotlines as well as narrative themes. Into this category fall Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior*, in which the protagonist's encounters with "global weirding" dovetail with her interpersonal and emotional dilemmas, and Nathaniel Rich's *Odds against Tomorrow*, in which a catastrophe expert experiences climatic crisis while grappling with existential questions of doom and accountability.

The critical response to cli-fi has been characterized by two common refrains. First, cli-fi (or, before the term was invented, environmental science fiction more generally) has a unique place in climate education and activism. As Ursula Heise wrote in 1999, "science fiction is one of

the genres that have most persistently and most daringly engaged environmental questions and their challenge to our vision of the future.”<sup>3</sup> In *Green Speculations* Eric Otto echoes and extends this perspective; works of environmental science fiction, he writes, “can serve environmentalism as educational instruments” and indeed are capable of “creating transformative environmentalism in addition to reflecting it.”<sup>4</sup> Cli-fi has garnered a striking amount of critical attention since Atwood tweeted the term in 2012, with articles concerning the redemptive potential of cli-fi published by *Dissent*, the *Guardian*, *NPR*, the *Atlantic*, the *New Yorker*, *Medium*, and the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (among others) since 2013.<sup>5</sup> Overwhelmingly, the response to cli-fi has praised the genre’s status as an entertaining yet *educational* genre by emphasizing its capacity for realistic (plausible, soberly related, and scientifically grounded) extrapolation into the future.

Consequently, the second common thread in cli-fi criticism is an insistence that cli-fi is unlike the popular genres associated with “mere” entertainment. In other words, cli-fi’s political potency is framed as inversely proportional to its reliance on the science fiction genre on which its name riffs. An early critic calls for climate change narratives that “steer determinedly away from apocalyptic scenarios” in favor a “measured and prudent” literary style.<sup>6</sup> Bloom claims that, while “sci-fi is mostly for escapism and entertainment,” cli-fi involves “facing the reality of global warming.”<sup>7</sup> A cli-fi author warns against conflating cli-fi and sci-fi, writing, “If you think stories showing the effects of climate change are still only futuristic fantasies, think again.”<sup>8</sup> Realism and the cautious extrapolation of feasible futures are thus held up as markers of *true* cli-fi. Indeed, as Robinson explains, “I feel like if you’re going to write realism about our time, science fiction is simply the best genre to do it in . . . we’re living in a big science fiction novel now that we all co-write together.”<sup>9</sup>

These trends in cli-fi criticism echo science fiction’s critical recuperation. Darko Suvin’s *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* marks the most influential defense of science fiction as something more than technoescapist pulp adventures. Suvin defines science fiction as the genre of “cognitive estrangement.” This requires two elements: first, estrangement, or a difference from the lived experience of the real world, produced by the introduction of a *novum*, or “strange newness,” and, second, cognition, which requires a shared metaphysics between the

author's world and the text, such that the reader can engage in a critical process to consider the link between the two.<sup>10</sup> This two-part definition allows Suvin to identify four kinds of literature: the cognitive and naturalistic literature of realism; the noncognitive and naturalistic literature that is a "sub-literature of realism"; the noncognitive and estranged literature that includes such genres as "myth, folktale, fantasy"; and, finally, the cognitive and estranged literature of science fiction.<sup>11</sup>

The value distinction that Suvin establishes between science fiction and fantasy has proven persistent. As theorists such as Carl Freedman and Fredric Jameson investigate the revolutionary charge of science fiction, they follow Suvin's lead in casting fantasy as less than rigorous. Freedman, for instance, while substituting for Suvin's "cognition" the more forgiving "cognition effect," which allows writers such as Ursula Le Guin to be included within science fiction, nonetheless insists that the cognition effect "sharply distinguish[es] science fiction from the irrationalist estrangements of such essentially ahistorical modes as fantasy or the Gothic, which may secretly work to ratify the mundane status quo by presenting no alternative to the latter other than inexplicable discontinuities."<sup>12</sup> Science fiction, by contrast, is "of all genres the most devoted to historical concreteness" and thus the most capable of performing (and producing) critical consciousness.<sup>13</sup> Jameson, too, insists that "the organization of fantasy around the ethical binary of good and evil" as well as "the fundamental role it assigns to magic" keep it from being truly historical—though, he concedes, "this does not mean that distinctive contemporary fantasy texts cannot emit signals and vibrations which are comparable to those of the best SF," despite being "as different from it generically as they are from more traditional fantasy as such."<sup>14</sup> In short, critics arguing for the legitimacy and significance of science fiction do so by making two claims: first, that science fiction can produce the revolutionary kinds of historical consciousness (and activated relationships to alternate futures) that realism and the historical novel once offered; and, second, that this political charge separates science fiction from the escapist genre of fantasy.<sup>15</sup>

There's a structural similarity, then, between the defense of cli-fi over and against escapist genres and the defense of sci-fi against the same. This is not to say that the critical responses to these genres are identical. For one thing, the genres against which cli-fi's defenders distinguish it include science fiction as well as fantasy; for another, cli-fi is typical-

ly defined as the literature of *extrapolation*, or the realistic projection of plausible futures from the present, whereas Suvin clearly identifies science fiction as encompassing both “extrapolative” and “analogic” models.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, the similarities between these critical receptions help in identifying the critical blind spots that have persisted in cli-fi discourse.

The most pressing issue is that the rejection of nonextrapolative, nonrealistic genres underestimates the range of cli-fi. Any definition of cli-fi that insists upon certain markers of scientific probability and literary realism elides the appearance of other genres, classifying their appearance as textual aberrations within works identified as cli-fi while entirely overlooking literary works primarily indebted to these genres. This emphasis on realistic, extrapolative narrative presents immediate issues. Are we to believe that nonnarrative forms, such as the poetry of Juliana Spahr, do not ignite a reader’s grasp of environmental futures and could not be identified as cli-fi? Are we, further, to accept the dismissal of “escapist” genres without considering the raced and gendered nature of that dismissal? It is worth noting Suvin’s description of the distinction between the reader of sci-fi and that of myth or fantasy as the difference between “a Darwinist” and “a medicine man,” which repeats the early masculinism of science fiction and feminine gendering of fantasy as well as the former genre’s association with imperialism. Moreover, the pleasures often dismissively associated with “escapist” genres include precisely those erotic and affective experiences that queer theory has reclaimed—and that, indeed, queer ecology has identified as crucial.<sup>17</sup>

My interventions, then, are twofold. First, I suggest that cli-fi includes works that engage productively with multiple genres—or, to use Freedman’s useful formulation, that demonstrate multiple generic *tendencies*—as they articulate environmental futures.<sup>18</sup> Second, I argue that the attempt to describe the pedagogical and political potential of cli-fi would be incomplete without reckoning with these alternative genre tendencies—and without considering the ways in which fantastical genres contribute to understandings of environmental futurity. Indeed, if (as scholars of queer theory have been particularly emphatic in suggesting) society is built on normative understanding of time and futurity, then new ways of imagining futurity can participate in the construction of social alternatives. This is the project of queer temporal-

ty: the effort to defamiliarize accepted understandings of time in order to disrupt the social norms that such understandings ground. It is not necessarily my suggestion that the multiple genres of cli-fi participate in the project of queer temporality. Nonetheless, my intent here is aligned with the premise of that utopian project, as I explore how different understandings of futurity sometimes offer, and sometimes occlude, potential alternatives.

### Fantasy and Extrapolation, in and beyond *The Bone Clocks*

*The Bone Clocks* is by no means the only clearly defined work of cli-fi that engages multiple genres, but *The Bone Clocks*' well-marked shifts between realistic and fantastical narrative have been so negatively received by critics that the novel offers an especially clear example of the need for multigenre analyses of cli-fi. As I examine the relationship between realistic extrapolation and allegorical fantasy in Mitchell's novel, I will discuss how these generic threads collaboratively produce a distinct politics of environmental futurity; I will also consider how this conjunction of genres illuminates connections between the political stakes of cli-fi and those of other forms of environmental discourse, particularly in relation to climate justice and reproductive futurism.

*The Bone Clocks* is such a complexly plotted and wide-ranging novel that any discussion of it demands at least a brief synopsis. Divided into sections that range across time, space, and narrator, the novel follows protagonist Holly Sykes from her rebellious adolescence in late twentieth-century Britain to her old age in the post-climate-collapse Ireland of the 2040s. Holly's life is intertwined with, as per Mitchell's tongue-in-cheek description, "an epic battle between good and evil," in the form of the Horologists and the Anchorites.<sup>19</sup> The former are immortals whose souls mysteriously migrate, awakening in a new body seven weeks after their old one dies; the latter are mortals who have learned to extend their life by feeding on the "decanted" souls of psychically powerful children. The Horologists have dedicated their considerable resources to stopping the Anchorites from continuing to fatally exploit innocent mortals. Holly's otherwise ordinary life is occasionally interrupted by encounters with members of both sides, and she ends up playing a major role in the Anchorites' eventual defeat.

Despite being longlisted for the Man Booker Prize, *The Bone Clocks*



received mixed reviews; Mitchell's insertion of fantasy genres in particular inspired responses ranging from gentle confusion ("Am I to believe in the hocus-pocus of the secret cult of the Blind Cathar in the same way I am to believe in the realistic portrayal of the death agonies of corporate capitalism—or should I believe in them in different ways?" Le Guin wonders) to more scathing critique ("The cosmology," James Wood writes, "has the demented intricacy of science fiction" and distracts from the realism-driven "human case").<sup>20</sup> The negative reviews all cite Mitchell's use of multiple genres; fantasy and realism, they suggest, have no business coexisting. To some extent, this is a familiar criticism of Mitchell's work; his extraordinary generic facility inspires both critical glee and charges of showboating.<sup>21</sup> In the case of *The Bone Clocks*, however, this response emblemizes cli-fi criticism's generic tensions; the realism that characterizes Holly's nonfantastical life is valued over the cosmology of epic fantasy.

In other words, reproducing the larger critical response to cli-fi, the parts of the book dedicated to Holly's life, particularly those that project the social catastrophes caused by climate change, are elevated above the sections that describe her involvement in high-fantasy dramas. Yet Mitchell's use of fantastical generic strategies in fact complements his use of realistic ones. In *The Bone Clocks*, realistic extrapolation operates alongside allegorical fantasy to demand a particular ethical response from the reader—one that addresses not only the threat of climate change but also the need for climate justice. In my reading, I take seriously the prospect that this novel (and by extension the cli-fi category to which it belongs) draws equally on different genres as it constructs a particular relationship between the reader and the environmental future. Both the extrapolation and fantasy sections work to inculcate outrage at the *social* injustices, as well as the ecological destabilizations, that climate change promises to exacerbate. Indeed, the fantasy elements underscore the novel's participation in the discourses of climate justice by emphasizing a crucial link between the injustices of the present and those of the climate-changed future. Further, only when the two genres are read in tandem are the sexual and reproductive politics on which these articulations of ethical climate futurity are founded brought into focus.

Mitchell's ecological politics are clearly on display in the realistic, extrapolative sections of *The Bone Clocks*. The novel's narrative is de-

signed to display the ravages that climate change promises to inflict. As Holly ages, her world is devastated by climate change and resource scarcity, and all her energy is dedicated to providing a safe and stable environment to her granddaughter, Lorelei (orphaned years before by a superstorm that downed a plane carrying her parents), and her adoptive grandson, Rafiq. Holly is crushed by the burden of guilt and rage at the harms for which she holds her generation responsible. “It’s not just that I can’t hold Aoife [Holly’s daughter] again, it’s everything,” she thinks:

It’s grief for the regions we deadlanded, the ice caps we melted, the Gulf Stream we redirected, the rivers we drained, the coasts we flooded, the lakes we choked with crap, the seas we killed, the species we drove to extinction, the pollinators we wiped out, the oil we squandered, the drugs we rendered impotent, the comforting liars we voted into office—all so we didn’t have to change our cozy lifestyles. People talk about the Endarkenment like our ancestors talked about the Black Death, as if it’s an act of God. But we summoned it, with every tank of oil we burned our way through. My generation were diners stuffing ourselves senseless at the Restaurant of the Earth’s Riches knowing—while denying—that we’d be doing a runner and leaving our grandchildren a tab that can never be paid.<sup>22</sup>

The relationship between the writer’s present and the environmental future is laid bare here. Mitchell’s readers, who are part of Holly’s generation, are invited to project themselves into the future and imagine how they will look back on the social choices of their youth. In Mitchell’s extrapolation, climate change will produce social instability, political and religious extremism, and violence—both direct and structural—against vulnerable populations. (Rafiq in particular acts as a lens onto social inequality; an orphaned climate refugee from Morocco with diabetes that requires regular access to difficult-to-acquire insulin injections, he allows Mitchell to address the geopolitical and micropolitical effects of climate change.) In short, Mitchell’s extrapolative narratives—those that project forward from the present into likely climate futures, those that satisfy both Suvinian definitions of cognitive estrangement and contemporary defenses of nonescapist cli-fi—allow Mitchell to produce a cautionary tale about the future that highlights climate *injustice* rather than universal catastrophe.

What has gone largely unseen in critical responses to *The Bone Clocks* is the presence of those same concerns about climate injustice in the fantastical plot. In the extrapolative sections, as I have shown, the futures of climate injustice are made literal. In the fantastical sections, however, they are made *allegorical*: the destructive consumption practices that Holly rues as negatively impacting future generations are magnified to an even more epic scale. This cosmology grounds the novel's vision of climate justice. In stark contrast to the Horologists—who live sustainably, without exploiting the energy resources of others—the evil Anchorites, who maintain their immortality by devouring children's souls, literally *eat* the future. The Anchorites thus serve as a fantastical allegory for the devastating environmental and economic practices of developed nations; Mitchell acknowledged and affirmed as much in a *Mother Jones* interview when his interviewer commented, “The immortals in the story, besides shedding light on our ageism, made me think about the relationship between resource scarcity and climate change.”<sup>23</sup> The Anchorites can thus be understood as fantastical stand-ins for the disproportionate rate at which developed nations contribute to resource depletion and global warming.

Indeed, in a pivotal scene, Mitchell invites the reader to recognize the Anchorites as allegories for the Western imperialism and exploitation that undergird climate injustice. In this scene, the Anchorites convince Sadaqat, a mortal affiliated with the Horologists, to turn traitor by promising he can join their ranks and attain immortality. The success of this persuasion relies upon a disingenuous framing of the Horologists as imperialists; as Sadaqat puts it, “they [the Horologists] are very like a white country—so sorry to bring race into this, but the analogy is spot on—a rich, white, imperial, exploitative bastion, which torpedoes the refugee boats coming from the Land of the Huddled Brown Masses.”<sup>24</sup> The novel immediately debunks this as a cannily planted deflection that more accurately describes the Anchorites—who, unlike the Horologists, not only actively consume other souls rather than peacefully coexisting with them but also are made up entirely of privileged whites—who, killing their double agent once he has served his purpose, spitefully tell him that it's because he's a “talentless, chakraless, *brown* traitor.”<sup>25</sup> The Anchorites thus diverge from what Noël Sturgeon describes as the “ecovillains” who typically populate environmental narratives; rather than being framed as aberrations, they are, as Sturgeon describes, part of

the “corporations or militaries or governments or white patriarchal science” (which, she notes, are “the real ecovillains on our planet, the ones the global environmental justice movement is presently confronting,” though popular environmental narratives rarely hold such villains to task).<sup>26</sup> Scenes such as these show how the fantastical elements of *The Bone Clocks* are not digressions from the political stakes of its realistic cli-fi plotlines; instead, they offer a supplementary framework that invites the reader to recognize the moral stakes and underlying causes of the ecological and social devastations described elsewhere.

This multigenre reading of Mitchell’s cli-fi novel points toward two implications for environmental futurity beyond the particularities of the novel. The first concerns representations of climate justice; the second concerns queer ecology. As this essay draws to a close, I’ll consider both how these implications might affect our understanding of cli-fi and how they might relate to climate change discourse beyond the bounds of the literary.

First, then, the fantastic elements of Mitchell’s novel break from the extrapolative components in their temporal location of climate injustice. For while the extrapolative narrative necessarily identifies climate injustice in the reader’s *future*, the allegorical plotlines concerning the Anchorites and Horologists destabilize this temporal perspective, placing climate injustice both in the present and in the mythic time of the fantastic. Critics skeptical of fantasy’s capacity to instill historical consciousness would identify this severing the link between the fantasy world and history as the genre’s weakness. However, this dislocation can also be seen as producing an uneasy *uncertainty* about the historical roots of future crises, inviting the reader to consider the unexpected confluences between past and present society and the catastrophic future. The novel, in other words, can be read as teaching the reader to see climate injustice in the present as well as the future. This is a welcome corrective to the popular climate-catastrophe narratives that focus on the future destabilization of white Western privilege rather than the environmental and climate injustices that are ongoing yet often ignored in the present.

Expanding our understanding of cli-fi’s generic wheelhouse thus helps us see how the genre does more than extrapolate into the future—indeed, how it helps to *connect* present and future, rather than posit a radical break between them. It also opens up a representational prob-

lem for climate discourse outside of cli-fi: the challenge of representing the link between documented presents and anticipated futures, against which documentary works such as *Chasing Ice* and *Years of Living Dangerously* are forced to contend. As we consider this dilemma, and need to avoid neglecting the injustices of the present while dramatizing those of the future, we might find useful the techniques of nonrealistic genres such as fantasy, allegory, and fable; indeed, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, which faced the same problem of shifting between documentation to speculation, opens with the nightmarish fairy-tale vignette titled "A Fable for Tomorrow."<sup>27</sup>

Second, the particularities of the allegorical fantasy in *The Bone Clocks*—namely, the cruel treatment of children—point toward the extent to which a concern for children often structures articulations of environmental futurity around climate change. Indeed, cli-fi contains many examples of this combination of climate change extrapolation and children as climate change allegory. Such stories are set in climate futures and use children to underscore the need to preempt such futures, meaning that children operate at the intersections of extrapolation and allegory: Maggie Gee's *The Ice People* describes parental conflicts against a background of climate devastation; T. C. Boyle's *A Friend of the Earth* juxtaposes the protagonist's mourning for the destroyed environment with his mourning for his daughter; and Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy begins in a world marked by global warming yet revolves around the creation of a species called the "Children of Crake" after their bioengineer "father." Further, the image of the child standing in for vulnerable environmental futures has structured climate change discourse outside the bounds of cli-fi. Highly visible activist figures such as James Hansen and Naomi Klein frequently refer to their own children and grandchildren to structure their emotional calls for climate action, while John Kerry made headlines for signing the landmark Paris Agreement on climate change while holding his young granddaughter.<sup>28</sup> These gestures may not be based in fantasy, but they share common ground with nonrealistic genres, in that their invocations of the future are metaphorical as well as predictive.

Mitchell's fantasy avoids such direct invocations of the biological family, just as his extrapolation involves adopted as well as biological descendants. Still, *The Bone Clocks*, like many other works of cli-fi and climate discourse, invokes the "image of the Child" that, as Edelman ar-

gues, produces the reproductive futurism in opposition to which queer-ness stands as “the side of those *not* ‘fighting for the children.’”<sup>29</sup> Queer theorists continue to reckon with Edelman’s critique; Elizabeth Freeman, José Esteban Muñoz, and Valerie Traub have argued that queer-ness need not be opposed to futurity, while theorists of queer ecology have read climate change as a challenge to Edelman’s position. As Una Chaudhuri suggests, “the threatened futurity that Edelman tracked in the figure of the endangered innocent child is no longer, in this new context, a convenient fiction” but “a deadly near certainty”; the question, as Sarah Ensor puts it, is “what possibly constitutes a sustainable ‘no future.’”<sup>30</sup>

In this sense, then, the child’s status as the emblem of environmental futurity reminds us that the nonextrapolative strategies of climate discourse can encode latent ideologies. And as Nicole Seymour argues, we must continue to interrogate these latent ideologies if we are to establish a “queer ecological ethics.” Seymour describes this ethical system as an environmental justice perspective that prioritizes “caring not (just) about the individual, the family, or one’s descendants, but about the Other species and persons to whom one has no immediate relations” and argues that queer ecological ethics may be precisely what the present moment requires.<sup>31</sup> Read against one another as parts of a coherent narrative whole, Mitchell’s extrapolative and fantastical plotlines certainly encode expansive visions of ecological ethics within and toward the environmental future, even while invoking childhood as a symbol of that future in ways that require continued critical attention from the perspective of queer ecotheory.

## Coda

In my account of the nonextrapolative, nonrealistic tendencies present within the burgeoning literary category of cli-fi, I do not mean to suggest that fantasy (or, indeed, any other genre) is inherently liberating or restrictive, inclined essentially toward or against climate justice or queer ecology. Indeed, my aim is to *deessentialize* the political charge of these genres—to point instead toward a more expansive mode of defining and defending the genres that articulate environmental futurity. The critical perspective for which I argue would recognize that the generic tools on which cli-fi draws are varied, encompassing genres that have

historically been subject to critical denigration—and that these supposedly “lesser” generic tendencies, in fact, can play a significant role in environmental conversations, illuminating the political stakes of environmental futurity’s discursive representation.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Rebecca Evans** is an assistant professor in the Department of English at Winston-Salem State University. She received her doctorate in English from Duke University in 2016. She researches and teaches in the fields of twentieth- and twenty-first-century American literature and culture, with particular interests in social and environmental justice, the environmental humanities, and science fiction. Her current book project traces contemporary American literature’s engagement with the representational challenges posed by structural violence, arguing that structural violence is both a defining feature of contemporary life and a representational problem that shapes the form and genre of post-1960 American fiction. Her work on environmental science fiction has appeared in *Women’s Studies Quarterly* and is forthcoming in *The Cambridge History of Science Fiction*.

#### NOTES

1. Bellamy and Szeman, “Life after People,” 192.
2. Tuhus-Dubrow, “Cli-Fi.”
3. Heise, “Letter,” 1097.
4. Otto, *Green Speculations*, 5.
5. The tweet itself introduced the term in a neutral tone, but Atwood’s considerable public audience meant that the term quickly gained ground among fans and critics of environmental literature. See also Evancie, “So Hot Right Now”; Fernandez, “Subfield That Is Changing the Landscape of Literary Studies”; Glass, “Global Warning”; Schulz, “Writers in the Storm”; Tuhus-Dubrow, “Cli-Fi”; and Ullrich, “Climate Fiction.” For scholarly overviews of cli-fi, see Johns-Putra, “Climate Change in Literature and Literary Studies,” and Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions*.
6. Macfarlane, “Burning Questions.”
7. Plantz, “As the Weather Shifts.”
8. Torday, “Why Writing Stories about Climate Change Isn’t Fantasy or Sci-Fi.”
9. Lea, “Science Fiction.”
10. Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 4, 8, 10.
11. Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 20.
12. Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*, 18, 43.
13. Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*, 43.
14. Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 58, 68.

15. For more on science fiction and the historical novel, see Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*, 44–61, and Jameson, *Antinomies of Realism*.
16. Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 27–30.
17. Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 50. For defenses of fantasy as worthy of serious critical attention and as encompassing myriad (not necessarily political) forms of subversive potential, see Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy*; Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis*; Jackson, *Fantasy*; Mendelsohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy*; and Monleón, *Specter Is Haunting Europe*. For discussions of the role of the erotic in queer ecology, see Gaard, “Toward a Queer Ecofeminism”; Sandilands and Erickson, *Queer Ecologies*; and Seymour, *Strange Natures*.
18. As Freedman suggests, “a genre is not a classification but an element or, better still, a tendency that, in combination with other relatively autonomous generic elements or tendencies, is active to a greater or lesser degree within a literary text that is itself understood as a complexly structured totality”; Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*, 20.
19. Schulz, “Boundaries Are Conventions,” emphasis in the original.
20. Le Guin, “Dazzle of Narrative Fireworks”; Wood, “Soul Cycle.” Other critics called the fantasy elements a “knock-off version of Harry Potter,” “new age blather,” and “paranormal hooley”; see Kakutani, “Lifetime Watching the World Devolve”; Charles, review.
21. Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (2004), for instance, incorporates nineteenth-century travelogue, epistolary narratives, thriller, picaresque, sci-fi dystopia, and postapocalyptic tale, while *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (2010) combines historical fiction with fantasy.
22. Mitchell, *Bone Clocks*, 560–61.
23. Patel, “*Cloud Atlas* Author David Mitchell.”
24. Mitchell, *Bone Clocks*, 526.
25. Mitchell, *Bone Clocks*, 528.
26. Sturgeon, *Environmentalism in Popular Culture*, 117.
27. “There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings,” Carson writes, until “a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change.” Carson, *Silent Spring*, 1, 2. My thanks to Shannon Davies Mancus for her insights into Carson’s use of fantasy and fairy-tale rhetoric.
28. Hansen, *Storms of My Grandchildren*, xii; Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 26–28, 419–48.
29. Edelman, *No Future*, 2, 11, 3.
30. Chaudhuri, “Sun’ll Be Hotter Tomorrow”; Ensor, “Spinster Ecology,” 409.
31. Seymour, *Strange Natures*, 27.

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