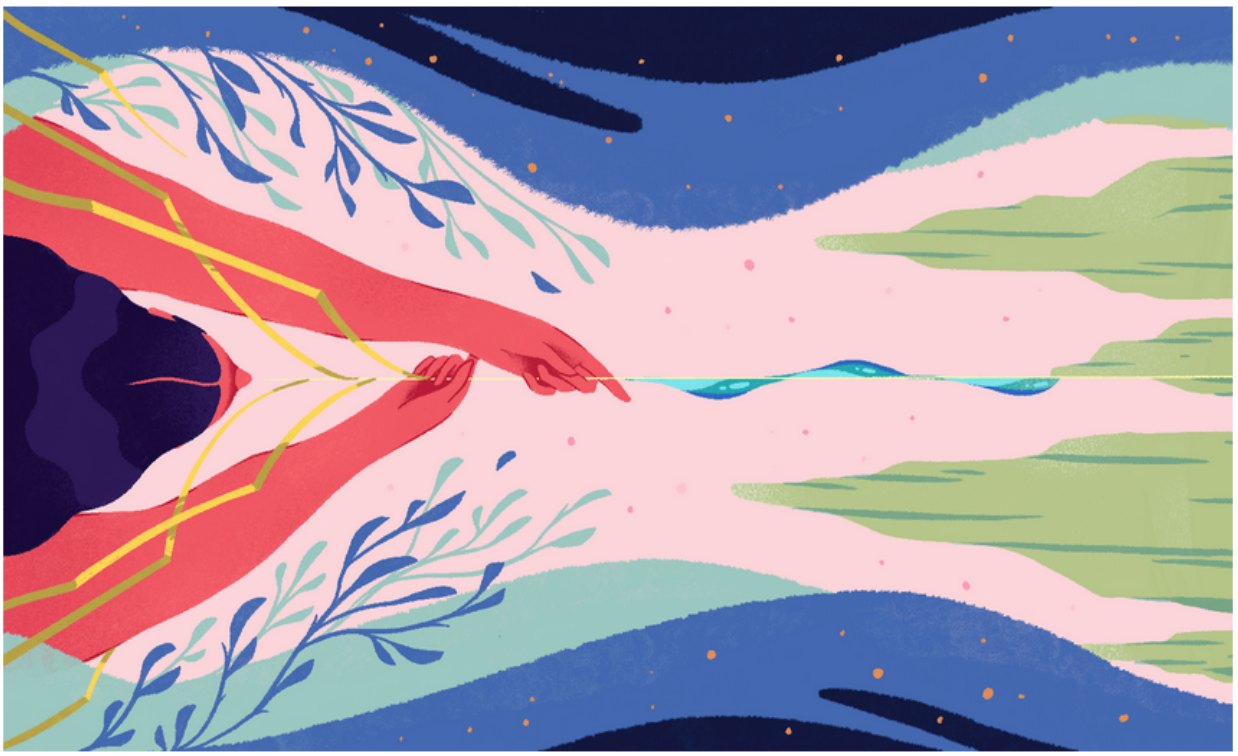
Rewriting the future

How are individual and collective processes of agency and resistance negotiated through writing climate fiction?



Grace Abe

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[1]Cover page of the climate fiction writing contest organised by Fix.
It states: **Climate fiction is the future. Write it.**
https://grist.org/fix/climate-fiction-writing-contest-imagine-2200-prizes/ Accessed on 01.07.22

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Foreword and acknowledgements

Books have been my friends for as long as I can remember. They have brought me joy, safety, and knowledge. They have been with me through childhood, pages smeared with grass stains as I lay in the field next to my home. They have kept me company on sleepless nights through teenagehood, as I learned to navigate a world more complicated than I imagined. They have accompanied me on numerous journeys as a young woman travelling around the world, heavy piles of books filling my backpack then replaced by a slick, black ebook. I feel so lucky to have the layers of these stories to enrich my life. I take comfort in the fact that, no matter what happens, there will always be books to read.

It is no wonder, then, that I fell in love with anthropology. The practice of ethnography provides a unique gaze through the countless narratives of human lives, these interwoven stories, silver threads mingling through time and space. I am glad that I could combine my love for stories and for ethnography in this research.

I am thankful for the enriching education provided by teachers of the SCIM master's of Utrecht University. The way I see the world has been changed for the better - I am more aware of my own place within it and of the way I can act for fairer futures. It will not be an easy journey, but I am glad to have taken the first steps under such good guidance.

This research would never have happened if not for the help, support and encouragement of my friends. Thank you for the numerous Whatsapp gifs, coffee-jittery writing sessions, and chair spinnings to celebrate each deadline.

To my supervisor for providing valuable feedback and advice.

To my family, for providing a quiet house when I needed to isolate myself and write, and for loving me despite my obsession with climate change. To the family cat, for keeping me company during long writing nights.

To nature, for always 'being there', calming my breath and my thoughts, and reminding me of why I am writing this thesis in the first place.

And finally, to the people I met during fieldwork, thank you for taking the time to (digitally) meet with me and answering my many questions. Thank you for pushing me out of my comfort zone, with tolerance and kindness; who would have thought that I would do improvisation theatre, or read my stories out loud? Above all, thank you for filling the months of my fieldwork with laughter, awe, and inspiration. When you say that creating a different kind of future is possible, I believe you.

The future is vast, it is diverse, and it is ripe for the imagination.[2]

Abstract

In 2022, the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warned once again of the severe environmental changes humanity should expect to experience over the following decades. As a counter-power to dystopian narratives brought forward by scientific reports and the news, a group of committed individuals strives to find solace in creativity. Following the lived experiences of writers of climate fiction, this digital ethnographic research aims to show how individuals and communities negotiate their feelings of eco-anxiety by engaging with hopeful narratives of the future. Through the operationalisation of an analytical framework which queries how processes of agency and resistance are negotiated within climate fiction in reaction to the current climate crisis, this study will interpret the reality of trying to change the system through the power of the imagination.

[2] Quote from the Instagram account of the environmental activist group *earthrise.studio*

"New metaphors have the power to create a new reality."
(Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 145)

Introduction

Our planet is 'overheating' (Eriksen 2016). The impact of human activity on Earth has been so significant that we have entered what some call a new epoch: the Anthropocene (Crutzen 2006), in which all "humans have become geological agents, changing the most basic physical processes of the earth" (Oreskes in Chakrabarty 2009, 30). The Anthropocene's principal impact on the planet is the anthropogenic emission of greenhouse gases, which trigger significant changes in global temperatures and climate (Crutzen 2006).
As I write these words, in late spring 2022, my home country, France, is facing a heatwave. I took a short walk earlier today and came back drenched, and worried. I filled up a glass of water and sat down in front of my computer once more, in a room darkened by closed curtains. I reflected on the fact that on the 4th of April 2022, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change[3] warned humanity once again of the severe environmental changes we should expect to experience over the following decades. The report stated that we have 3 years to seriously curb our CO2 emissions if we want to have a chance at limiting the impact of our climate future. However, it seems that many people do not want to face the urgency of the situation. On the news this morning of June 15th, 2022 – as temperatures in France are higher than they have ever been on record at this time of the year – were pictures of children joyfully playing in water, people barbecuing in their gardens and tanning on Mediterranean beaches[4].

In these times of pressing social and ecological challenges, how can humans fail to act? While the crisis at the planetary level influences everyday life and decisions (such as flying or eating meat, as well as using fossil-fuel energy), there is still a human phenomenological experience of the world deeply embedded within the individual, creating a deep sense of time and history within each human (Chakrabarty, 2021). These two chronologies (of everyday life/ deep time) bring together human and non-human scales of time within people, intertwining the geological time of the Anthropocene and the time of our everyday lives in capitalism (ibid, 10). Critically, some consequences of the actions of

[3] The IPCC is the UN body which assesses the science related to climate change
[4] https://www.rtbf.be/article/des-enfants-dans-les-fontaines-pour-illustrer-la-canicule-inacceptable-11012890 Accessed 20.06.22

anthropogenic climate change are already visible in historical time, while other consequences will be visible only in geological time. While this urgent situation should confront us with finite calendars of immediate actions, nations assume an indefinite calendar to tackle climate change, which leads the world to fall into an issue of temporality. Urgently, Chakrabarty calls for a shift from global, Anthropocene thinking to a kind of planetary thinking, asking humans to think of the "habitability" of our world. As global warming increases, the habitability of the planet shrinks. So far, there has been a global failure to create a governance mechanism for planetary climate change, even though the global governance apparatus such as the United Nations were made to deal with such global issues (ibid).

While a growing number of people realise that we live in "catastrophic times" (Stengers 2015), individual climate action struggles to get to the core of the problem. This is perhaps because we are now suspended between two stories of the world; one is a story of economic growth and the other a story of the consequences of this growth (ibid). This understanding of growth is what Eriksen (2016) calls 'runaway processes', i.e forms of growth that eventually lead to collapse when the unintended side-effects become more noticeable than the beneficial intentional effects. This forms an intrinsic issue between economic growth and sustainability (Eriksen 2016), what Bateson (1972) calls a double bind. This catastrophic double-bind seems to currently hold most of the world in a standstill, hovering between two stories – a story of continued growth, and one of ecological doom. What alternative do we have in a world society "which seems to have locked itself to a path bound to end with collapse?" (Eriksen 2016, 19). Perhaps we need another path. Perhaps a 'third instance' (Bateson 1972) is needed to challenge the process and alter the relationship of this double-bind.

Fighting wars with words

How can humans make sure that they build this new path? Before all, we need to be able to imagine it. In 2015, Tsing showed that life can keep thriving even in capitalist ruins. Following the life of the most valuable mushroom in the world, she opened the reader's imagination to environmental renewal. As sustainability and the imaginary are inherently linked (Ghosh 2018), the possibility to imagine other paths, other futures, is perhaps part of the solution to tackle the ecology crisis of the Anthropocene. In a world of two Manichean stories, there is a need for flexibility, as it holds 'uncommitted potential for change' (Bateson 1972, 497).

The ecology crisis asks us to imagine other forms of human existence. Fiction, according to Ghosh (2018), is the best suited of all cultural forms to achieve this. Voices are rising in response to the 'great derangement' (ibid) troubling the Earth, and many of those voices are speaking through fictional stories. Indeed, the steady emergence of climate fiction or "cli-fi", a term coined in the mid-2000s by journalist Dan Brown, shows that global warming has triggered the creation of a whole new literary genre of fiction (Trexler 2015, 8).

Over the past decade, climate fiction has gained popularity among readers and scholars (Schneider-Mayerson 2020). Brady (2019)[5] believes that "climate fiction can help create vibrant narratives that enable us to feel an emotional connection to what we're losing", and to understand how planetary changes may affect our daily lives. She states that, at its best, "cli-fi conjures, spell-like, meditative spaces in which we ponder our deepest fears before emerging transfigured", arguing that engaging with climate fiction is a transformative personal process.

Speculative fiction, climate fiction, and solarpunk

I will be using the term 'climate fiction' throughout this research to describe speculative fiction which includes climate change as a central narrative arc. Climate fiction can be both dystopic and hopeful. As I gradually deepen the focus of this research specifically to hopeful narratives within climate fiction, I will use the term "hopeful speculative fiction", and sometimes even 'solarpunk'. Solarpunk refers to a sub-genre within climate fiction, with narratives that offer climate solutions and portray a just and nature-positive futuristic world. It strives to offer inclusive, de-colonial, anti-capitalist and anti-dystopian narratives, portraying harmony between nature, technology, and humanity. While there are many emerging subgenres surrounding climate fiction (such as lunarpunk or hopepunk), solarpunk was the term that my informants used the most, referring to it both as a literary genre and a social movement. Solarpunk futures are also often portrayed in art, showing what the future might look if humanity succeeded in solving major contemporary challenges.

[5] https://www.guernicamag.com/climate-fiction/ Accessed on 20.06.2022

Solarpunk art by Luiz Perez[6] and Rita Fei[7]

Environmental citizenship

Schneider-Mayerson (2020) argues that cli-fi is "ecopolitically significant", and that reading climate fiction can encourage pro-environmental actions in individuals who already have strong pro-environmental attitudes. The drama "lies in the emotional arcs of the characters as they face their lives with alternating hope and despair, knowing that while the future looks bleak, it has yet to be written" (Brady 2019). Characters and readers may find themselves in the same situation, facing a future that they can help shape. Trexler (2015) argues that the complexity of assemblage of characters and things into a narrative sequence "allows the novel to explore diverse human responses to peak oil, alternative energy, carbon sequestration, carbon trading, consumption, and air travel, in ways that are difficult for nonfiction or other art forms to portray" (ibid, 10). In that sense, climate fiction might help build a sense of "environmental citizenship" (Dobson and Bell 2005) i.e the idea that individuals are an integral part of their environment, that the future depends on how they care for the ecosystems, and that a sense of responsibility leads to environmental activism.

[6] https://www.artstation.com/alcaminhante/
[7] http://www.ritafei.com/

In the twentieth century, remembered for its destructive wars, there was "another war, also worldwide, also total, also colonial, that we lived through without experiencing it" - a war that has already taken place, and that we have already lost (Latour 2017, 9). This war is of humans turning against the world, imposing losses on the planet by seeking to dominate and possess all things. Echoing this, Serres (1995, 33) states that "the sum total of harm inflicted on the world so far" is equivalent to the destruction provoked by a world war, all because of humans' obsessive focus on growth. In a world in which neoliberalism "seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market" (Harvey 2007, 3), it seems difficult to imagine taking a different path. Considering the alarming state of the world in light of anthropogenic climate change, it becomes clear that individuals who negotiate their phenomenological everyday experience of life take for granted a world that no longer presents itself as a certainty (Chakrabarty 2021). This possibility to ignore the reality of the world is troubling. We are in a crisis now, insists ecofeminist scholar Donna Haraway, and we need to stay with the trouble in order to act (2018).

For Foucault, power and discourse are bound tightly together: 'discourse is the power which is to be seized' (Foucault 1981, 52). The words we choose to talk about the current global situation matter. Famous dystopian-writer Margaret Atwood prefers the term "everything change" to the limiting term "climate change", and Leigh, a poet and writer in her sixties interviewed for this research, agreed. Tying her greying hair in a bun, she said that referring to the situation as climate change does not do justice to the scope of the issues: "I tend to talk about ecological change and ecological awareness, because I don't think it is just about climate change. I don't think you could separate it out. It's everything. Absolutely everything needs changing, and is changing."[8]. In order to change everything, perhaps imagination comes as an answer.

Contemporary times are marked by a disconnection to nature: humans in the Global North are living indoors, "naively pollut[ing]" what is beyond their area of life (Serres 1995, 28). The solution to a long-term, global problem must go beyond these self-created restrictions. In order to engage with the future, we need to rethink the idea of progress. If the way we currently use language, writing and logic holds us back and leads us to neglect the Earth, then, perhaps, writers have to turn it back. With the power of words, they can spread ideas.

[8] Leigh, interview, 25.04.22

Rethinking the world

Latour (2017) plays with the imagination of his readers; he asks us to imagine a world in which we would already be looking back at a great ecological war with pride, teaching new generations about what has been done to prevent future disasters. He tells us that, while too little has been done in the past, perhaps it is not too late to change our actions in the present. This is what climate fiction aims to show. By portraying visions of the futures, it reminds us of what can be done in the present. Climate fiction tackles the issue of "everything change" by rethinking the entire way society is built. Latour (2017) reminds us that we are facing "a profound mutation in our relation to the world" and that by not considering it as such, we as humans choose not to use our powers of invention to find solutions. This reminds us of Tsing (2015), whose main advice, as she follows the life of the matsutake mushroom, is to cultivate the arts of noticing, to be pulled back into our senses and pay attention to what is around us. Recognition is important – it is a "passage from ignorance to knowledge" (Ghosh 2016, 4) which enables a world you might have presumed dead to become alive around you. But how do we make sure that we practice noticing? How do we start paying attention to the world around us? The question might not remain unanswered for long: the possibility to ignore the life of the world around us is slowly starting to disappear. Indeed, as the geological effects of climate change become a more tangible reality, one will have to acknowledge the natural world more and more. These geological changes can be referred to as "the intrusion of Gaia", which grasps our human attention and forces us to notice (Latour 2017). By intruding, Gaia interrupts the course of normalcy, and obliges us to think about what happens in the world (Stengers 2015, 58). The art of noticing and of paying attention must not only be reclaimed; it becomes an obligation (ibid). I became acutely aware of this as I stayed locked at home in June 2022, unable to go out during the day because of the harsh heat falling on France, powerless in the face of elements bigger than I. As the intrusion of Gaia interrupted the daily course of my life, I was forced to pay attention to the immediate effects of ecological change, as it prompted conversations with family members and neighbours.

Climate fiction could help us to notice and act before it is entirely too late. It aims to put into words the historical tension between the reality of destructive global warming and the failed obligation to act. It offers "a medium to explain, predict, implore, and lament" (Trexler 2015, 9). Climate fiction writers, who have already learnt to notice, aim to spread this knowledge through vibrant narratives. While many recent studies focus on the impact of climate fiction on readers (Schneider-Mayerson 2018; Schneider-Mayerson 2020; Milkoreit 2016, and so on), no study exists on how writers themselves are impacted by the act of

writing climate fiction. This gap inspired this research. Indeed, while acknowledging the existence of climate fiction, Ghosh (2018) states that there is an imaginative failure in the face of global warming. This statement piqued my curiosity, and I decided to work around it. I wanted to meet the individuals who do answer this pressing call of the imagination. Many writers are aware of the urgency of the situation, and have picked up their pens in response. Focusing on the possibility of creating better futures, they take it as their duty to show that another path is possible. This research aims to shed an anthropological light on individuals engaging with writing, publishing, or encouraging the development of hopeful climate fiction. This research aims to understand what motivated them to do so, and how it affected their lived experiences.

Research population

When facing the huge challenges of our time, humanity is divided into different categories (Latour 2017). The first group is of climate skeptics, deniers and 'quietists'. The second group is of 'geo-engineers' who, having realised the urgency of the world situation, urge for increased domination over a nature they consider insubordinate. The third is of lethargic observers who feel overwhelmed by the extent of the issue. Some of these observers still feel hope that something can be done within the framework of existing institutions – but Latour calls them 'bipolar', filled with energy until they feel a "terrible urge to jump out of the window" (12, 2017). This harsh social critique might leave a bitter taste to the reader, left to wonder which of these groups they belong to. But fear not! There is another group. While its members do not possess entire sanity either, they are looking for ways of resisting despair, finding solace through creativity – they are artists, hermits, gardeners, explorers, activists among other examples. Perhaps these are the ones seeking to conclude a 'peace treaty' (Serres 1995) to our current world war (Latour 2017).

The people I had the chance to speak with for this thesis fall into the category of creatives described by Serres (1995). Most of them were writers, either during their spare time or as their main occupation. They kept blogs, wrote short stories or books, worked in the editing world, published academic papers, sent submissions to short story contests or organised these contests, held storytelling workshops, collected stories, hosted book clubs, and so on. On the side, most of them are also engaged in reading climate fiction. All of them were interested in the power of the imagination in troubled times, and found solace through creativity. They took the roles of storytellers, workshop participants, editors, journalists,

activists, and readers, sometimes many of these roles at once. Their curious minds and their hopeful words guided me through this research.

Participants background

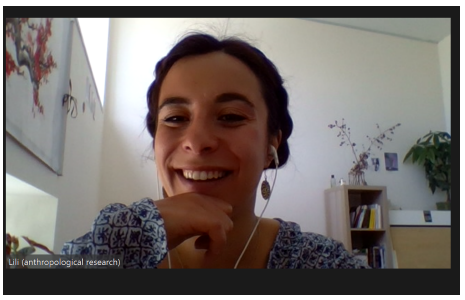
Out of the eighteen people I interviewed, 17 were from the Global North[9]: one from France, one from Ireland, eight from the UK (from Scotland, Wales and England), one from Canada, one from Norway, and five from the US. One participant was from India. At the time of the interviews, all participants were based in France, the UK, Canada, Norway, the US, Italy, the Czech Republic, and Spain.

All of these 18 people had pursued studies in the Global North and had achieved higher education, in disciplines as diverse as psychology, English literature, social work, chemistry and physics, sustainable behaviour change, gender studies, neurosurgery, film and media studies, marine conservation, creative writing, educational sciences, product design, journalism, mechanical engineering, and environmental engineering. Because of this, I ask the reader to keep in mind that the opinions shared in this research represent only a small part of the people engaged in the climate fiction movement, which is a global and inclusive movement.

Positionality: Hi, I am Lili!

This research was fully digital. During three months I attended 52 online events, hosted by 30 different organisations. These events were varied and required different levels of engagement: I wrote stories, read them aloud and received feedback, I did improvisation theatre, I watched visual interpretations, I discussed stories in book clubs, I listened to academic panels, I played a climate fiction game, I fell asleep to a hopeful storytelling night, I did visualisation of stories, closing my eyes as I was prompted to do so. I listened to podcasts made by informants and watched movies. I listened to people's poems, browsed through participants' blog posts, and read every story that was sent or recommended to me. I enrolled in three classes of writing climate fiction that lasted over the span of several weeks. I also conducted 18 interviews.

[9] While I acknowledge that the term "Global North" has its limitations, I choose to use it broadly to talk about countries situated in Europe and Northern America. In this research, it also means that the people I interviewed were not living in areas of the world facing the most immediate impact of climate change.



Zoom call, April 2022[10]

Reflecting on positionality is an important part of the practice of anthropology, as it can heavily influence the way one collects and perceives data (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011). I am a highly educated French 25 year-old woman living in the Netherlands. Sustainability is an important component of my studies and personal preoccupation: I have strong opinions on climate change, environmental activism and systemic change. Because of this, I did not start this research unbiased. However, while partaking in workshops, I aimed to be as objective as possible, to mostly listen to other participants and to only share my opinions if I was invited to. My interests likely helped me understand participants more easily, as we share similar personal journeys. Additionally, my interest fuelled this research, as I had a genuine curiosity to know how climate fiction could help spread sustainable knowledge and ideas. I found myself asking questions I was sincerely curious about, and learned a lot from my informants both on a personal and professional level. As a self-proclaimed bookworm, I do believe in the power of stories, and was eager to find a way to incorporate creative writing in my professional practice. Writing climate fiction helped me realise how difficult it can be to imagine hopeful futures. Because of this, my admiration for informants grew, as well as my desire to witness hopeful stories shape the collective consciousness, so that we as humans all find it easier to imagine optimistic futures.

Ethics and role of researcher

As a professional anthropologist practitioner, I need to be mindful of the way my own code of ethics intersects with my professional ethical principles (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011). During fieldwork, I followed basic anthropological ethical principles; I aimed to do no harm to my participants, to be open and honest regarding my work, to obtain informed consent, to

[10] I used the username 'Lili (anthropological research)' throughout fieldwork

inform my participants if my research changed, and to guarantee my participants' anonymity by protecting and preserving my records (American Anthropological Association 2012). All participants' names in this thesis are pseudonyms.

Methodology & operationalisation

The decision to conduct a digital ethnography was motivated by two main reasons. The first being the context of the covid-19 pandemic. As of the time of preparing for fieldwork, lock-downs and restrictions were still in place in the Netherlands. Secondly, most events related to climate fiction/speculative fiction take place online, as it is a global cultural phenomenon. By conducting my research online, I was able to join these various groups and get access to fuller data.

The empirical data gathered for this study focused on three core ethnographic methods: digital participant observation, auto-ethnographic writings, and interviews with individuals related to climate fiction. This methodology allowed me to amalgamate a multi-dimensional interpretation of why and how people write hopeful speculative fiction and helped me give meaning to the theoretical topics for this thesis. This triangulation of methods enabled the research to permeate various layers of my daily habitus, as I will now outline.

Participant observation is a method in which an ethnographer engages in "the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture" (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 12). I conducted digital participant observation by joining events related to climate fiction. It gave me the opportunity to reach a particular research population (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019). Far from reducing the 'thickness' of my data (Geertz 1973), digital ethnography allowed me to collect, work with, and combine different data types and sources within one research environment (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019). By doing participant observation through digital ethnography, I was able to get an overview of the way these events are embedded in people's daily lives. While being a participant observer, I tried to "continually try to make the tacit explicit in field notes and analytic notes" (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 20), and referred to these fieldnotes to write vignettes afterwards.

Secondly, I used semi-structured interviews to elicit the perspectives of my participants on how they relate to climate fiction. Semi-structured interviews provide both solicited and unsolicited information about the subject's thoughts and assumptions, how they were produced, and what functions they can serve (Hammerson & Atkinson 2019).

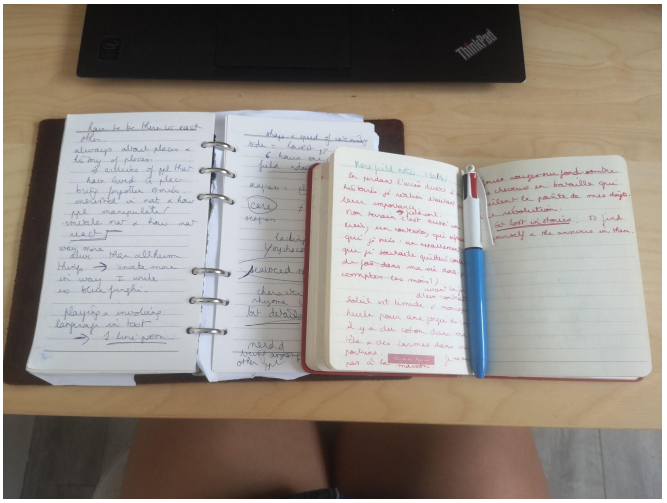
I conducted 18 interviews. Most of the people I interviewed had been fellow participants in workshops and had responded to my messages in the chat[11]A few came from specific organisations that I had contacted directly on their website.. During the research, many participants took the role of gatekeepers, recommending me to other people to interview, or putting me in contact with others (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019). I quickly realised that the world of hopeful speculative fiction is quite small. It was only after seeing my name pop up in several workshops that some participants decided to contact me for an interview. While conducting interviews, I was mindful of my reactions, as people tend to look for validation as to whether an answer is appropriate or for signs of a judgmental reaction (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019). I often reacted positively to what a participant was saying, as we shared many common opinions. I did not try and hide it, as I thought it made me closer to the participants. When conducting interviews, I broadly followed a list of questions, but was open to new developments initiated by the interviewee. The interviewees had read and agreed to the consent form beforehand.

Lastly, I used methods of auto-ethnography. During fieldwork I kept a diary, as I have done for years. After trying to keep my personal and ethnographic reflections separate, I eventually decided to merge them all in my usual diary, as my personal and ethnographic reflections seemed to build on each other. Occasionally, when I felt a strong urge to record fieldnotes and could not access my diary directly, or when I felt emotional, I used voice recordings. This enabled me to say more in a shorter amount of time, and to organise my thoughts in a different way.

When I participated in climate fiction writing groups, I also wrote my own climate fiction pieces. I often write stories, but had never written climate fiction before this research. Doing the exercises alongside other participants enabled me to understand first-hand the challenges of writing hopeful narratives for the future. As "ethnography is essentially a relationship-building exercise" (O'Reilly 2012, 100), having a set role in the community and sharing the activities of the people might have helped me create contacts more easily. I kept in

[11] See Appendix 1

mind the duality of my position within some situations (Reed-Danahay 2009), such as my dual role of participant writer/researcher during workshops. Keeping an intellectual diary (O'Reilly 2012), writing short stories and recording voice notes constitute a varied amount of personal data that I was able to reflect on and incorporate in the analysis and discussion of my research if relevant.



Field notes and diary excerpt

Thesis structure

In this thesis, I question how writing hopeful climate fiction challenges dystopian narratives of the future, and how it shapes individual perceptions of agency, community and capitalism.

In Chapter 1, I use the concept of eco-anxiety to show how negative emotions linked to the ecological crisis affect my informants' lived experiences. After outlining the participants' relationship to the news, I show how they face an individualisation of risk which amplifies their feelings of guilt and grief. At the end of chapter 1, I explain how participants strive to go beyond negative feelings of eco-anxiety. I show how, through a process of agency, participants extricate themselves from a crippling sense of risk. This process is the first step in their journey to write climate fiction.

In Chapter 2, I show how participants keep challenging negative feelings by focusing on everyday little wins and incorporating them in their stories. Additionally, we will see how participants engage in a process of scientific research to incorporate it in their writings. I will explain how this research process can be defined as environmental activism. Building on this, we will see how the core aim of participants is to resist the doom and gloom narrative of the climate crisis, as they challenge dystopian futures portrayed by mainstream media.

In Chapter 3, I build on this idea of resisting dystopia to show how writing hopeful climate fiction is part of a broader movement of system change. Creating a new narrative for the future means resisting the current neoliberal system. Building on the concept of quantum social change (O'Brien et al 2019), I show how participants' stories portray a diverse, fair future that aims to empower people in the current environmental crisis. I will show that, by doing so, these stories create a sense of belonging and help people build communities. I will explain how these stories go beyond the human and beyond the present time, focusing on multispecies and multigenerational entanglements.

These different chapters will enable us to look at processes of agency and resistance that are engaged through the act of writing climate fiction. I aim to give us an overview of the act of story-making in climate fiction, as stories are shaped by participants' personal experiences, and in turn shape societal narratives for the future.

CHAPTER 1 | Resisting risk

"Forests in stories are the foundation for much of popular wisdom. They allow for enchantment and disenchantment, and play a key in your inner landscape. It's dark, it's really difficult to penetrate it and it's very easy to be disorientated, to get lost. But sometimes we need to get lost so we can get found again."

The woman on my screen has a soft Scottish accent, a soothing voice that lingers at the end of her sentences. Upon welcoming us in the zoom call, she had asked if we were here because of our interest in climate change or storytelling.

Both, actually! I had written in the chat before briefly explaining the theme of my research. Many of the 24 participants had a background in working with eco-anxiety: Fleur wrote that she worked with eco-grief and climate anxiety but also loved mythology/stories, Delphine used storytelling in her counselling practice with a focus on eco anxiety, and Sharon worked as an ecotherapist. Our workshop guide, Joanie, introduced herself as a professional storyteller who also works with Art Therapy, Psychodrama and Embodied Dance and Movement therapies, and aims to incorporate the rhythms of nature into her stories. There is a smile in her voice as she invites us to sit back:

"Right, let us get started. You are here because you do have a sense that there is a kind of crisis in terms of climate. For the moment just try and forget everything you are bringing from the outside world. A shopping list, worries, meetings… Just be here, and now, in the world of stories." Joanie reaches for something outside of the screen and a chime resonates as I close my eyes, Her round face and the background of leaves and fairy lights fading away. I hear her take a deep breath and I do the same.

"And I'd like you just to… just let the energies come, think of stories that take place in a forest. And perhaps you would like to share them in the chat".

I type in the chat, gentle clicking sounds, as it gets filled with mentions of Snow-white, Narnia, the Jungle book, Hansel and Gretel, Goldilocks, Vassilisa, Robin Hood… Joanie reads the titles and laughs, commenting on them.

"As we see, forests are really important for stories. Wouldn't the world be a different place if we could all sit together in a circle under a tree? Perhaps there wouldn't be eco-anxiety because we would want to look after the planet. Yes, this is what I will ask for Christmas next year. She laughs. Oh lots of things coming up, fantastic, lovely."

The background of leaves and lanterns sparkles behind Joanie as she speaks, shades of green and blue. She stops talking for a second while she checks the chat, her red lips slightly open as her eyes scan the screen.

"Ok. I will ask you to close your eyes once more. Just relax and just think of a story character connected with the woods, the forest. Chimes resonate. Let us just breathe a little bit, feet on the floor. We're going into the forest but you're just very much here." I let my hands rest on my thighs. "Spend a few moments to greet your story character. You realise that they are alarmed because the forest is changing. The changes have been coming gradually but now they are much bigger. You are going to walk together in the story forest, and the character is going to show you how the forest has changed and how that is going to affect the story. How will their story be if that story forest is no more?"

My back resting against the uncomfortable chair of my bedroom, I allow myself to walk through that forest. I can hear the washing-machine in the room next to me, and I shut my eyes tighter. It is difficult to conjure up a specific character. After a minute my mind settles on a small fairy, her body as small and dry as a twig. When I was a child, my dad always pretended to see fairies as we walked through forests, and to this day I keep looking for them in the woods. This fairy is beautiful and yet so fragile. She turns to me without saying a word, hovering next to my face. I want to smile at her but something keeps me from doing so. Something is wrong. I follow her for some time in that dry dark, sad forest, taking note of the eerie silence broken only by the cracking of wood under my feet. I see no one else, nothing else. From far away I smell the scent of smoke, I see an ominous orange glow. I look at the fairy's twig-like body. I want to cry.

Joanie's gentle voice interrupts my thoughts: "Some of you may need to spend some more time in the forest, and some of you might feel the need to come back and start writing freely about the experience. And when you can, write in the chat, so we get a little sense of how you are feeling."

She looks straight into the camera, her gaze frank. I look at the blue stone of her necklace, chasing away the image of the fairy. Picking up my pen, I jot down some words in my red notebook: grief, fire, fairy, lonely, scary, and in capital letters: LOSS.

As an individual and anthropologist with a strong keen consciousness of the impact of our anthropogenic actions on the destruction of the earth, I often experience negative emotions that can feel overwhelming, sadness, anger, fear, and a sense of loss. These emotions were often triggered during fieldwork, as many of the workshops I attended reflected on ecological changes. These feelings are usually associated with the popular term 'eco-anxiety' often coined in modern popular and academic discourse (Panu 2020). In 2017, the American Psychological Association (APA) and EcoAmerica defined eco-anxiety as "a chronic fear of environmental doom" (68), and "the mental health impacts of climate change and other ecological crises are estimated to be very significant" (Panu 2020, 1).

In the event of this vignette, as Joanie prompted us to imagine walking in a changing forest, I had a hard time imagining positive change. Immediately, my mind conjured visions of wildfires, dying trees, and trapped animals. Usually, when massive changes in ecosystems are occurring, they are "accompanied by opportunistic and often environmentally devastating resource exploitation" (Crate and Nuttall, 2016). Forests of my own home region, the Vosges, in eastern France, have been ravaged by bark beetles and drought for the past years, making it all the more vulnerable to forest fires. As resilience theorists offer analogies "between old-growth forests and large corporations, and between forest fires and financial panics" (Peterson 2000 in Hornborg 2016), meddling with the environment can prove harmful on many levels; humans, by modifying it, create the conditions that allow infectious diseases to emerge and spread, such as the infamous covid-19. All of this crossed my mind as I imagined the changing forest, and as fear for the future and grief for what is lost invaded my mind, I felt a familiar tug of anxiety in my stomach.

Effects of climate change in the Vosges, France[12]

Effects of eco-anxiety were often acknowledged in workshops I attended. "I wouldn't want to leave you with that grief", Joanie said after we shared our negative feelings. "The medicine of stories has accompanied us through dark times and it can accompany us now in this time of uncertainty." During the rest of the event, she narrated a hopeful story, which made us reflect on what can be done as individuals. I was by now used to the patterns of these climate fiction workshops, in which feeling sadness, grief and anger is only part of the journey. Learning to embrace the feelings was part of the importance of noticing, of the art of paying attention in answer to the intrusion of Gaia (Stengers 2015). During workshops, participants were encouraged to pay attention to their feelings, negative or positive: "If you feel frustration, or sadness, that is fine! Everything that you feel is right in the world of improvisation." Greta, a theatre coach, told us one evening as she was taking us through an improvisation evening based on a climate fiction story.

In this chapter, drawing on Panu's work, Anxiety and the ecological crisis (2020), and the concept of socially constructed silence of Norgaard (2011), I will outline how individual, institutional and societal responses to climate change impact participants' emotions negatively. I will show which role the news plays in enhancing these negative emotions, and explain how it helps foster a sense of crippling risk in participants' daily habitus, as they navigate feelings of grief and guilt. To conclude this chapter, I will show how participants strive to go beyond these negative feelings, and how it leads them to writing climate fiction.

[12] https://correspondances.fr/vosges-le-scolyte-ravage-lequilibre-des-marches-du-bois/ Accessed 01.07.22

Anxiety and the ecological crisis

People who experience eco-anxiety often feel fear, helplessness, and guilt (Panu 2020). Eco-anxiety becomes part of people's daily lives to the point of them living in a state of 'chronic crisis' (Vine, 2004), in which they constantly expect the worst to happen, are overstimulated by news of ecological disaster, and deal with feelings of eco-grief and guilt. It is important to consider this in the light of climate fiction because these feelings are often felt by writers, and are an inherent part of why these narratives exist in the first place.

While many of my participants expressed that they experienced feelings of eco-anxiety, they also pointed out that not everyone in their social circle did. Trevor, an Englishman in his twenties, mentioned his privileged circle of friends from university: "I look at them and I am like *Man, you just think everything is going to be fine, don't you?*"[13]**.** In 2011, sociologist Norgaard carried out ethnographic research in a small Norwegian town to try and understand why people, especially those in more privileged countries, are not taking action when faced with climate change. She used the framework of "social organization of denial" constructed by Eviatar Zerubavel (2002) to show how "features of culture and everyday life make it harder for people to think about climate change and easier for them to ignore it" (Norgaard 2011, 13). Noorgard found that people in the town experienced strong pressures and contradictory social dissonances related to climate change. Because of this, rather than face the situation, they resorted to "socially constructed silence". This silence in turn increases the anxiety of people who do feel eco-conscious, as they would wish for more understanding from the social groups around them (ibid). One of my informants, Leigh, expressed the anguish that this socially constructed silence makes her feel: "one of the things that I find difficult and alarming is the fact that people are going around as if it weren't happening, you know, ignoring it. It's a different sort of denial, isn't it?"[14].

Sociologists Norgaard and Brulle (2019) argue that fear of cultural trauma triggers efforts to avoid large-scale social changes associated with climate change. In turn, this results in social inertia at individual, institutional, and societal levels. Individuals desperately try to keep their ecological habitus (Bourdieu in Brulle and Norgaard 2019) intact. On an individual level, a disruption of this habitus can lead to emotions of guilt and anxiety, as it triggers potential traumas and anxieties that people experience in relation to climate change (Panu 2020).

[13] Trevor, interview, 24.02.22
[14] Leigh, interview, 25.04.22

Conflicts also exist at the institutional level, which results "in either the changing of institutional procedures or the repression and marginalisation of the individuals who raise these issues, or both (Eliasoph 1998 in Brulle and Norgaard 2019)" and at the societal level, as "climate change challenges the dominant doxa of neoliberal capitalism and the nation state" (Klein 2014 in Brulle and Norgaard 2019). In this context, taking a proactive approach can prove difficult. Individual, institutional and societal actions are interdependent (ibid), and influence one another, as shown by Leigh's statement[15]:

> "After COP26, which I actually found very energising and inspiring, I witnessed the institutionalised bureaucratic outcome and the hypocrisy in terms of government choices. It was just words, rather than things really changing. I had done so much work. And I felt quite depressed, quite depleted for a while."

As a woman in her sixties who has cared about sustainability for decades, Leigh is familiar with these negative feelings. Institutional and societal decisions can often lead to increased feelings of eco-anxiety.

The role of the news

The socially constructed silence can be reflected in news and media outlets, as the shared desire of institutions and societies to keep the status quo is reflected in a political agenda. Individuals make it a point to exclude any information that would require reshaping of their beliefs regarding their ecological habitus. Thus, they select "news sources that confirm their beliefs that climate change is a hoax or uncertain, and label climate change advocates as ideologues." (Brulle and Noorgard 2019, 902) For people experiencing eco-anxiety, this failure of news to report the urgency of ecological changes fosters feelings of helplessness and frustration. I experienced these feelings myself:

> I watched the video of young activist Miranda Whelehan and the way she is savagely ridiculed by Good Morning Britain presenters[16]. What's the point of throwing words into the air if they are ignored by the media? They called activism 'a disruption'. It makes me so angry. How to write about hope? I need to think a little. What am I hopeful

[15] Leigh, interview, 25.04.22
[16] Miranda Whelehan | ITV | Good Morning Britain | 11 April 2022 | Just Stop Oil Accessed 20.06.2022

> about these days? Not the immediate future. Maybe the mid-time future. Maybe.[17]

On the other hand, when news outlets do report the urgency of the crisis, people struggling with eco-anxiety often express that they feel overwhelmed by news (Panu 2020). Still, despite negative feelings, my participants made it a point to keep informed about what happens in the world, engaging in a process of constantly re-shaping their ecological habitus: Grace, an author in her fifties who has been engaged in social causes for decades, states: "I have a responsibility to know what is going on in the world and not to close my eyes"[18], while Lena, as a younger individual who just finished her university studies, says: "I do try and keep up this weird thing of like, I should watch the news, because I want to know what's going on. But oh, my God, I don't want to know what's going on."[19] While many scholars have recommended limiting media exposure to limit eco-anxiety (Panu 2020), participants struggle between what they feel as a duty to know what is going on in the world, and the damaging effect it has on their mental health. Sometimes the news feels so debilitating that it prevents any positive action. Ambre, a prolific writer of speculative fiction, felt it strongly in 2020: "Everything was nuts. It was the summer of the George Floyd protests and I was like what do I do with all of this? I couldn't think of the future. There's literally a part of my brain that shut down. I was having a really hard time writing because it requires all this imagination and I just couldn't."[20] Epstein (in Panu 2020) regards "overstimulation" as a major cause of anxiety. Constant media exposure to disturbing information about ecological damage is an important fuel to people's experiences of eco-anxiety. Overstimulation is made worse by social media and smartphones, as individuals can be connected to potentially disturbing information on a constant basis (Panu 2020). As we discussed media report and awareness, Maxine shook her head, telling me that she does not believe that news can trigger climate action: "even the shocking environmental tragedies that used to shock us like the BP spill or, you know, Fukushima is still leaking radiation, the Gulf of Mexico is still pumping out oil, and nobody seems to care anymore."[21]. Constant exposure to news can feel debilitating for individuals as the amount of social and environmental issues seem far beyond change.

[17] Extract of field notes, 16.04.22
[18] Grace, interview, 24.03.22
[19] Lena, interview, 28.04.22
[20] Ambre, interview, 18.02.22
[21] Maxine, interview, 24.04.22

As an answer, participants of this research found personal ways to negotiate their relationships to the news by trying to limit the amount of news they get each day, hence regulating the impact the news has on them before it becomes debilitating. Interestingly, the metaphor of news as drugs came back recurrently. "My relationship to the news is like drinking poison. I have to do it in micro doses."[22] Ambre described herself as a "news junkie" who is learning to take breaks. News is seen as something to consume in order to stay in touch with the reality of the world, but previous negative experiences have taught participants to regulate the amount they get. "It's a habit, you just scroll and you just find horrible, horrible things", said Trevor, before adding with a smirk: "But actually, I am a recovering social media user"[23]. I laughed and congratulated him, thinking of my own tricky relationship with social media, the endless hours of scrolling through disastrous ecological news. As this research unfolded, there was news of heatwaves in India, floods in Australia, the new GIEC report gave humanity three years to curb its CO2 emissions, and Ukraine's war raged over oil, among other overwhelming news. I myself would feel depleted and had to take regular breaks from the news.

The tragic individualisation of risk

Risk and guilt

The ecological crisis causes difficult feelings of uncertainty, unpredictability, and uncontrollability, all of which are factors in anxiety (Panu 2020). The role of uncertainty and unpredictability in anxiety theories is major; the individual feels a threat without knowing its nature or when it will come true. When uncertainty is tainted by dismal or catastrophic expectations we speak of 'risk'. Uncertainty implies recognition of change and awareness that states of affairs are not static; they can alter drastically, for better or for worse. Framed as 'risk', a hazard is assessed and a possible negative outcome is determined (Boholm 2003).

Looking at the notion of "risk" is looking at ways of engaging and dealing with future uncertainties (Jovanović 2018). Beck (1992) coined the paradigm of "risk society" to describe a new stage in modernity, bringing a particular focus on the prevention of risks caused by modernization. He also drew attention to the social nature of risk and the importance of the relationships that define it. Risk does not exist in itself but it emerges from a social process by which a phenomenon or practice is labelled as such (Beck 1992) Contexts in which

[22] Grace, interview, 24.03.22
[23] Trevor, interview, 24.02.22

individuals must confront risks by themselves without getting access to experts systems of knowledge is what Beck calls a "tragic individualization of risk" (Beck 2006) where the responsibility of choices falls on a "responsible consumer". I argue that the way institutions and societies handle the ecological crisis is a "tragic individualisation of risk" for citizens. Made both vulnerable and responsible, individuals have to deal with the feelings of eco-anxiety that arise from it. This ascription of guilt (responsibility) is a powerful political move, as it shifts the notion of blame from societal actors to individuals. Ascribing guilt identifies the object of anger, whether 'decision-makers', 'politicians', or 'the system' (Kleres and Wettergren 2017) - or in that case, the individual. While dealing with their eco-anxiety, individuals also have to deal with self-blame. While "governments and industry are also widely understood to have a moral obligation not to impose risks on the innocent unsuspecting public" (Boholm 2003), governments of the Global North, which are responsible for the largest part of climate change, are failing to take charge.

When facing risk, people who experience eco-anxiety often report feeling helpless and powerless (Panu 2020). "The scale of suffering, it's so huge. I'm not sure morally you can live life and just ignore it." Trevor, the virtual background of leaves behind him blurring the contour of his curly hair, told me: "But yeah, I don't feel guilty." He paused. "I have convinced myself I don't feel guilty."[24]. This intertwining of grief and guilt is strongly felt by many activists. There is a fundamental potential for feeling guilt in the Global North, stemming from realising the responsibility of the rich part of the world for causing climate change. (Kleres and Wettergren 2017). Many participants expressed guilt for the situation of disaster in which people already suffering from direct effects of climate change find themselves.

Writers often used metaphors or literary references to describe their own feelings, or other people's reality: "One person's climate apocalyptic future is another person's climate present. So many places are experiencing a very kind of post-apocalyptic world, probably not so far from the plebe lands of The MaddAddam Trilogy [by Atwood]."[25] These terms demonstrate how important climate fiction can be; fiction provides references to describe harsh realities. For writers, there is a thin line between reality and these stories, between some people's present and a possible future for all. As Leigh told me: "People from somewhere like the Philippines or Bangladesh, they are on the front line, even though I don't like that militaristic metaphor." She stopped for a second, taking a sip of water. "And in the west,

[24] Trevor, interview, 24.02.22
[25] Maxine, interview, 24.04.22

we're just getting little glimmers of what the future will bring."[26] Lines are blurred, as climate fiction fills the gap to represent what is and what could be. Loss is often shown in climate fiction pieces. In the vignette where we began, we saw that stories can provide a space to deal with emotions and facts that individuals push away, including the loss of what once was.

Risk and grief

"Each day we lose valuable parts of our biosphere as species become extinct and ecosystems destroyed — yet where is their funeral service? If our world is dying piece by piece without us publicly and collectively expressing our grief, we might easily assume that these losses aren't important." (Macy 2012, 32). Storytelling can help us express our grief, individually and collectively, and use creativity to transform the guilt we can feel as privileged individuals into a productive form of risk, giving reality to the chronic crisis (Vine 2004) experienced by readers and value to the loss. It teaches us that it is not too late. We might be able to change the story so that Rue can also live a full life – albeit different than the way we live it today.

Logan, who makes videos about climate fiction, tells me about the book Limbo by Esther Figueroa, set in Jamaica: "It makes you love this place and its nature and its culture and its people. And then it shows you all the ways that it's being destroyed. I feel real grief. It's so tragic."[27] However, she explained that, as a conservationist, she has to "really be careful how long and how hard I think about it because it's easy to get overwhelmed and feel like, well, nothing I do is going to make any difference." Ambre, who earlier mentioned the crippling summer of 2020, added: "You can't plan out the future when you're in that surviving mode, it's literally a brain mechanism. I was like, oh man, all these people are trapped in this and so am I."[28] I, too, found myself struggling with the notions of helplessness. During fieldwork, as the invasion of Ukraine slowly started to feel like a probability, I wrote:

> I feel restless. I question this research. What is the point of cli-fi (of trying to protect the earth) if at the same time governments destroy places and people - if wars keep happening? What is the point of activism if not all efforts go to climate change?[29]

[26] Leigh, interview, 25.04.22
[27] Logan, interview, 08.04.22
[28] Ambre, interview, 18.02.22
[29] Extract of field notes, 21.02.22

Such feelings of helplessness trigger people to think that their own actions are inconsequential. However, all the people I met for this research shared one belief; they needed to step out of this crippling state of anxiety in order to act. This is where climate fiction can help.

Building myself a raft

Reclaiming agency within the environmental crisis starts with us facing our own negative feelings. In March, I read the story "A full life" by Paolo Bacigalupi, published in 2019, in which a teenage girl, Rue, gradually witnesses her world crumble around her, until nothing as she knew it remains. As life becomes increasingly difficult, Rue has to flee time and time again, until she moves to Boston where her grandmother lives. The last lines of the story left a lasting impression on me:

> Rue stood in the flickering darkness, tasting the blood in her mouth and clutching her bruised ribs. Her grandmother shifted in her sleep. The air conditioner droned, fighting the October heat. Even with the doors and windows closed, Rue could smell the Canadians burning. The world that had existed before, for thousands of years, going up in smoke.
>
> Rue tried to remember a time when something in her life hadn't been on fire, or underwater, or falling apart, and realized she couldn't. She tried to remember a time when she had slept as peacefully as Nona.
>
> Nona said she loved Rue, but all Rue felt was empty distance between them—the shredded gap between the life her grandmother had enjoyed and the tatters that Rue had inherited. Her grandmother had drunk espresso in Italy and meditated in the temples of Kyoto. She'd lived a full life.
>
> Rue imagined strangling her.[30]

[30] A full life, by Paolo Bacigalupi. https://www.technologyreview.com/2019/04/24/135741/a-full-life/ Accessed on 01.07.22

Here, loss was made all the more important as it was too late to do anything about it. Reading this story, I felt a huge sense of grief, but also guilt. It made me reflect on my role in this crisis, as an individual who has enjoyed travelling around the world for the past few years. Days after reading this, on a sleepless night, I wrote in my diary "I do not want to take the plane anymore.", and months later I still feel strongly about it. This example shows how powerful climate fiction can mark the individual's consciousness to reshape processes of agency within the global climate crisis, and lead to concrete actions.

Similarly, while participants acknowledged that eco-anxiety was fully embedded in their lived experiences, they did not fall into hopelessness, an emotion which Panu (2020) describes as a loss of agency or loss of a sense of meaning in life. Indeed, each of the participants aimed to turn feelings of eco-anxiety into a constructive place. They cultivate the sense of active hope which Macy (2012) describes as a conscious practice of acknowledging the pain and moving to the direction one wants to achieve. As Grace puts it "The more I learn, the more I understand that this is a full blown crisis and there are days when I just think it's hopeless, honestly. But I can't afford to stay in that place. It's a discipline to not be hopeless."[31] For the people I met, a sense of efficacy came through building hopeful stories. It helps break the socially constructed silence that clashes with their personal feelings.

Devi had to face this feeling of cognitive dissonance as she started working as a designer for an appliance company: "I love designing for people. But does it really have meaning when it gets drowned out in the chaos of how much people are consuming today? No, I can't live in ignorance anymore. I don't think a lot of people can. This is why I write."[32] Writing comes as an answer to bigger issues of society, but also to the feelings of eco-anxiety experienced by participants. While it causes psychological pain, eco-anxiety can cause individuals to rethink their ecological habitus and to build more sustainable lifestyles, both individually and communally (Panu 2020). Grace, who had spent decades living in a small conservative town and volunteering for change, said: "Most of us have some kind of apocalypse inside, and creative writing is a way to take that apocalypse and express it on paper, to heal ourselves.[33] In this way, writing acts as a catalyst to externalise eco-anxiety, a process of agency building from negative feelings into action.

I often witnessed this process of agency during writing events. In April, the participants of a writing class were asked to write a piece on future generations. Most of us

[31] Grace, interview, 24.03.22
[32] Devi, interview, 14.03.22
[33] Grace, interview, 24.03.22

wrote about feelings of guilt, loss, and apologies. Then came the turn of Marta. Her red curls filled the screen, her face tilted as she must have laid the laptop on her legs. Her voice, marked by a Liverpool accent, rose. Each word is like a pang, a quick, angry rhythm of spoken poetry:

> *Don't tell me about future generations*
> *I'm childfree*
> *Carefree*
> *Not my bloody problem see*

Later on, she explained that she was tired of feeling guilty. She rejected the 'tragic individualisation of risk' imposed on her. While she cared about the state of the earth enough to join a group focusing on writing climate fiction, she did not want negative feelings to cripple her. She used creative writing to channel these feelings, and in turn found some solace. Similarly, Ambre described writing as what saved her, what helped her respond to the feelings of eco-anxiety. Like Devi, or Grace, she made an active decision to be hopeful. "I was drowning in the news. I was despondent and panicked. It was a conscious choice that I needed to build a raft to get myself out of this. Otherwise I'm just not going to make it. So I write."[34] This is a perfect illustration of the way participants turn to climate fiction. After acknowledging their own pain for the world, they make the conscious choice to turn to action.

Chapter conclusion

In this chapter, we have outlined how participants resist the eco-anxiety that is found at the individual, institutional and societal levels. Resisting a sense of crippling risk, they challenge these negative emotions to foster a sense of active hope, and write stories. This process of agency enables them to take control of their own perception of the future. In the following chapter, I will outline in more details how writing these stories is an act of resisting the collective dystopian narrative of the future, and how, in turn, these stories aim to encourage readers to go through the same process of agency.

[34] Ambre, interview, 18.02.22

CHAPTER 2 | Resisting dystopia

On a dark evening in February 2022, I make myself a cup of tea and sit in front of my computer. I fold my left leg under me and I open my emails, scrolling until I find the link of the online event I registered for, which I know will focus on creative solutions to face climate change. As the green dot next to my camera lits up I check my hair on the screen, arranging it with my fingers, before pressing "enter the meeting" and joining the other 40 participants.

A few minutes later, the hosts introduce the author of the evening; Walt, a man with grey hair and a clever smile that makes his cheekbones look rounder. "Thank you for having me!" he says in a deep voice. "I am delighted to be here." His words resonate in my room as he starts reading one of his short stories, narrating the fate of two teenagers living in a resilient coastal community in the near future: "over the years, life after the storms had developed into a predictable pattern…". I shift on my chair, arranging a light blanket on my shoulders. The story takes us through a narrative of disasters before ending on a more hopeful note. Walt's voice recedes.

"Thank you", a voice resonates. People raise their hands next to their faces to wave in appreciation, and I join the movement. When everyone is back on screen, the woman in charge of the event, Karyn, unmutes herself.

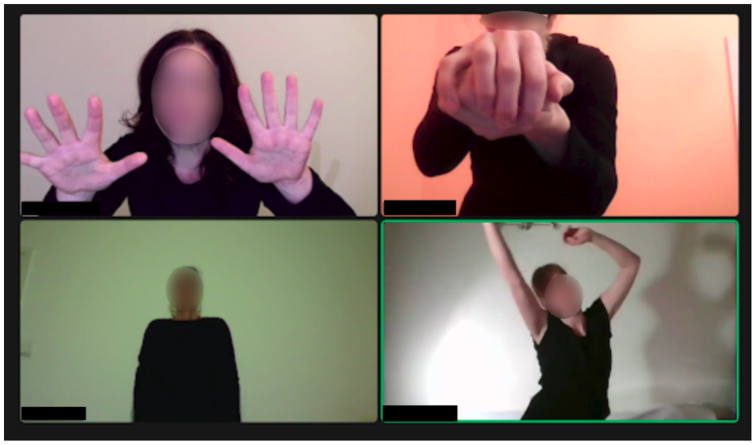
"Thank you, Walt, that was beautiful. Really beautiful." She smiles, her face lit up by the golden glow of a lamp out of the frame. "Now, would anyone like to share what the story made them feel? Once you have shared, our playback theatre team will enact your interpretation for us" Her eyes scan her screen, from left to right. "Anyone?*"*

"Yes, yes. I would like to."

I locate the woman's face on the up-left corner of the laptop, as she brushes a strand of hair from her face. Her username says 'Mathilde'. She takes a deep breath, and starts speaking:
"The story resonated very deeply with me because it's… it's my story actually. My

family comes from the North Carolina outer banks. As I heard the story I kept thinking about that place. It was always very windy, and after storms we would go look for shells. There were bridges with houses, as in the story, and when I was a teenager I met a boy I really liked." Her voice trembles and she stops for a second, getting closer to the screen. "That was almost 40 years ago and now those islands are disappearing because of climate change; the sand is eroding, the islands are getting smaller, locals are being displaced, storms are stronger, people can't make a living with the fishing that they used to do for centuries. It is getting harder to live there." I see other people nod as she speaks, their faces serious. "So this story made me feel nostalgic, but there was also a lot of grief for a lifestyle that is lost and can never be regained."

Karyn, the host, invites us all to turn our cameras off and watch the theatre improvisation of Mathilde's story. Faces disappear one by one until only four squares remain, a woman standing still in each of them. A guitar melody starts being played in the background. We wait, all sitting in our rooms in various parts of the world, while slow music fills the space.



[35]

Suddenly, in the small square at the bottom of my screen, a hand moves, the first actress reaching out with a slow gesture. She bends her body slowly, almost as if moving is painful. She leans more and more, until she reaches the limit of what the screen shows us, her fingers pointing to the next square as if searching for an impossible contact. She stands still in this pose, her hand outstretched, her face tense.

[35] Screenshot taken during an event on Solarpunk storytelling, February 2022

At the top right, another woman starts moving. Clutching a cloth between her fingers, she whispers fervently "it's my story... it's my story", her face close to the screen, repeating the movement for a minute until she stands still.

A few seconds pass before the woman in the square beneath her lays a hand on her heart. Leaning towards the camera, her black hair falling on her shoulders, she whispers “40 years ago, and I still feel him. I still feel that shore in me” As she speaks, her hands move rhythmically over her heart, clenching the fabric around her neck in a desperate motion.

Then, the woman in the last square moves slightly and turns her gaze to the screen with a desperate look, holding out her finger to us “they disappear, no, they disappear, they go away... they will go, no, no, oh no…” her wails mingle with the sound of the guitar, which grows louder.
The four women begin to move again, all together this time. The movements and sounds blend together, superposed; “it's my story”, arms reaching out, “I still feel him”, eyes staring at the screen and hands clenched on the heart, “oh no, no, no…”. The effect is sad, hypnotic, the guitar plaintive like an echo of the past, music of what is already lost. Suddenly everything comes to a standstill, and silence reigns. When the host asks Mathilde for what she feels, her voice resonates in the virtual room, muffled:

“I am very moved, almost to tears. I really appreciate that, thank you.”

I myself feel emotional, and I can see this being reflected in the chat, people thanking the actresses for their performance, and Mathilde for sharing her story. During the following hour stories continue being enacted by the four women, coming alive in front of us.

Building hopeful storytelling for the future sometimes means using negative stories to create a shared positive experience. In this event, I witnessed how being able to share stories in a creative way can help individuals to go beyond the negative emotions possibly triggered by eco-anxiety. Mathilde felt inspired to share her own story because she related to the fictional story that Walt had written and narrated. It triggered an emotional response that she felt safe enough to share with the rest of the forty participants, as she knew from the introduction of the event that the other people also feel compelled to use collective

imagination as a positive tool against climate change. As the hosts of the events said afterwards "when we share our story, it becomes everyone's. It stops being something stored in our body and mind but it releases and reaches other people, becoming shared, collective. Each one of us, witnessing it being played back in the scene, can resonate with that – even just a little bit."At the end of the event, after many interpretations had been shared, participants expressed a feeling of relief, communion, and hope:

> ***author 09:30 PM***
>
> *Thank you all for dreaming of better tomorrows.*
>
> ***Louis H. 09:31 PM***
>
> *Always encouraging to meet others who are trying to create a more positive feeling about a seemingly dark future…*
>
> ***Chloe 09:31 PM***
>
> *Thank you, this is bliss.*

I myself jotted key words in my diary: "Inspiring, happy, bubbly, sense of hope". The event was another step for me to understand how feelings of eco-anxiety can be used to create hopeful stories to share within a community, and in turn inspire others to do the same.

Building on chapter 1, I look at how participants use their sense of active hope to focus on the good around them. I look at their process of scientific research when writing climate fiction stories, and how this process is a form of environmental activism. Lastly, considering stories as collective goals, I show how hopeful climate fiction inherently resists dystopia, and will focus in particular on the solarpunk genre.

The little wins

Climate change is embedded within the lived experiences of participants. Trying to get out of the despair that can be caused by the forms of eco-anxiety discussed in the first chapter, participants foster a sense of active hope (Macy 2012). Once they have accepted the intrusion of Gaia (Stengers 2015) and reclaimed the art of noticing, participants' perception of the world is once more transformed. The force of this "everything change" is all encompassing and becomes a constant, stable component of their lives. Accepting that they are living in a time of 'derangement' (Ghosh 2018) shifts the way they experience their daily

lives. However, rather than focusing on negative feelings of eco-anxiety, participants foster a sense of active hope to create a positive reaction to what is around them. Vilde, a Scandinavian woman in her twenties, explained patiently: "It is like climate change makes everything matter more. You know, every act and every little sustainable act becomes more important."[36] In a world where issues are all-encompassing, there is value to be found in every little thing. Sam added that "Because there is so much love and so much uncertainty, every win is such a big win. Because it makes it possible."[37] Rather than fostering a sense of overwhelmingness, climate change can act as a reminder to pay attention to what matters. Once they acknowledge their privileged position in the world, participants can acknowledge the good that is to be found within their own lives.

This system of value of every little thing is reflected within hopeful speculative fiction. As individuals, writers, and readers, my participants aimed to create a vision of the world in which every act counts, in which every person counts. This belief is found within the stories themselves. Logan is a conservationist who reads many narratives of speculative fiction in her spare time. She makes videos about the subject, and when I approached her for an interview, she kindly accepted. She talked about what she looked for in climate fiction:

> You look for the wins that you could actually achieve. You know, painting a picture of one person fighting the big bad and winning is great, but that's not how it works. The wins come from so many people. Fighting tiny battles all the time and racking up those little wins to mount up to something bigger. And the books that show me those little wins, that is what really motivates me, because those are things that I can do, or those are the things that I can believe that other people can do. You know, I don't really respond that well to the unrealistic win, but the little wins, the achievable wins, I like those stories a lot.[38]

Here, we see that focusing on the little wins is not merely a way for participants to find inner balance. As shown in chapter one, people do use writing as a cathartic practice, to externalise their "inner apocalypse", but the aim of writing these stories goes beyond themselves. There is still a sense of urgency, of needing to find meaning in face of the ecological crisis. Being

[36] Vilde, interview, 30.03.22
[37] Sam, interview, 11.04.22
[38] Logan, interview, 08.04.22

able to recognise the little wins of daily life means that participants are able to write about them, and share a message of active hope. By showing what is good, and what is achievable in daily life, stories of hopeful speculative fiction can create a space for conversation, and for action. As in Logan's case, the little wins feel like a hook to grasp people's attention, the liminal space from which to attract the attention of readers and foster a sense of active hope.

Breaking down science

By showing the smallest of wins, the ecological crisis can be broken down in digestible, comprehensible narratives. This creates a sharp contrast with the current mainstream news narrative, or with scientific academic publications. As we discussed their project of writing a hopeful speculative comic book, Zane, a Canadian in their thirties, told me that they write fiction to talk about the reality of what the media fails to say in an approachable manner, and that creating a narrative of images and words might be an answer to making science more approachable.

Works of fiction can be complementary to news, as they help understand on a different level the effects of climate change (Trexler 2015). The reluctance of people to change their daily lives could be explained by the fact that they perceive the risks of climate change to be remote: the farther away in time and space people think a threat is, and the more difficult it is for them to visualise the threat, the less involved they are (Roeser 2012). Weber (in Roeser 2012) argues that risk communication strategies should explicitly and carefully appeal to emotions. Emotions can lead to a more thorough understanding of the moral impact of climate change, "by sympathising with its victims and future generations, but at the same time, it can serve as a more reliable source of motivation than purely rational knowledge about climate change" (ibid, 1034). As a conservationist, Logan particularly enjoys reading climate fiction books which communicate science in an approachable way.

> The breakdown of science communication is where we have gone wrong. It is like we are speaking a different language. Books can help us communicate. They give people icebreakers. People don't want to talk about climate change or endangered species… but they'll talk about a book.[39]

[39] Logan, interview, 08.04.22

Logan expressed what is wrong with climate change communication; until recently, it has focused on presenting complex data in a format that is intelligible to peers, rather than presenting images and stories of the human experience of climate change (Wang et al. 2018)**.** On the website dragonfly.eco[40], which gathers a community of people interested in climate fiction, Andersen writes: 'nowhere in the reports that IPCC has been publishing for the last 25 years does one find characters forced to live in the future living conditions sketched' (2014).

Climatologist Curry (in Schneider-Mayerson 2018, 475) stated that while "scientists and other people are trying to get their message across about various aspects of the climate change issue… fiction is an untapped way of doing this—a way of smuggling some serious topics into the consciousness of readers." Scholars of environmental communication and environmental psychology have argued that the arts can play a critical role in influencing beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours related to climate change (Milkoreit 2016). For example, Corbett and Clark argue that the arts allow "the so-called invisibility of climate change to be seen, felt, and imagined in the present and the future" and "encourage critical reflection on existing social structures and cultural and moral norms" (2017, 59). As Christensen writes in Green technology magazine, 'Numbers numb and stories stick'[41]. This interpretation suggests that climate fiction could participate in rendering climate change more intellectually and emotionally accessible, acting as a bridge between scientist voices and vernacular opinions.

This is encouraging news. As our world keeps "overheating" (Eriksen 2016), works of climate fiction become more widespread: they are no longer relegated to the margins of literature, but instead represent some of the most renowned English-language authors writing today, including Margaret Atwood, Barbara Kingsolver, Amitav Ghosh, Ian McEwan, Cormac McCarthy, David Mitchell, and Kim Stanley Robinson (Schneider-Mayerson et al 2020). Creating these futures often requires the use of scientific information as a source of ideas about future environmental change, theories of change to grapple with possible social change, and the interaction between these two (ibid). Scientific knowledge plays a major role in determining what the brain is capable of conceiving, constructing and designing (Milkoreit 2016). But science as an information source has important limitations, such as problems of access, synthesis, learning, cultural cognition and political manipulation. As we have outlined, climate fiction aims to go beyond these limitations in order to bring forth possible

[40] https://dragonfly.eco/cli-fi-short-essay-worlds-importance/ Accessed 20.06.22
[41] https://www.green-technology.org/magazinenews/climate-gloom-doom-bring-need-stories-taking-action/ Accessed 20.06.2022

futures, and social change. What does it mean for writers? Making sure that the narrative is engaging, but also that science is communicated in a comprehensible and enjoyable way transforms the creation process. In order to write factual science in an intelligible manner, writers must engage in a process of thorough research.

Extensive research

Zane and I met during a writing workshop, in which, as portrayed in the vignette, we were invited to share our personal stories. After connecting with each other, we decided to meet once a week to write together. As they were living in Canada, we would usually meet in the afternoons, European time. We would work in silence and check up on each other at the end of each session. Zane was mostly focusing on doing research for their speculative comic book. They wanted to write a speculative society as realistic as possible, and researched different technologies, agriculture, indigenous knowledge, urban design, architecture (with accessibility of buildings for example) and even the best kind of sustainable toilets! By drawing a world as fully researched as possible, they hoped to bring a world that seems plausible to readers, that they can picture and imagine living in.

In order to write her latest novel, Amber did extensive research on energy, as the narrative is told through the viewpoint of power engineers. Similarly, Devi discussed her experience of research with design and creative writing. She stated that speculative fiction provides correlation with the current state of the planet, "if you don't fully understand the ebbs and flows of what's happening currently it's going to be very hard to build empathy and get people to relate"[42]. As a teenager living in India, Devi would lie awake at night, staring up at the ceiling, feeling anxious about the state of the world. Nowadays, as a 20-something postgraduate student in the United States, she witnesses her teenage sister going through the same process, and it saddens her to think that there must be so many other young people feeling the same way. "There is a thin line between reality and fantasy that speculative writers have to learn to thread with". She mentioned her own writing research, focusing on crypto and blockchain, and what that might hold for the future. In the writings that she shared with me, the knowledge is fully embedded in the story, as the characters working with cryptocurrency have to make choices that will influence the state of the earth. Months after reading her story, I can still picture the room in which characters had a meeting and discussed their company's ethics, looking over a futuristic city. In that sense, cryptocurrency became

[42] Devi, interview, 14.03.22

more real and tangible for me as a reader with no knowledge of these topics, making it engaging while still bringing awareness of the challenges surrounding it. “Once you hook someone and you have them see and believe and experience, then you can often get them to sit down with you and dive deeper into your world. It’s always a creative layered process of finding the connection with your audience.” Because of this, finding a way to make science emotionally closer to readers is an important part of writing climate fiction.

Stories are campaigns

To connect with her audience, Devi decided to write a narrative inspired from her personal feelings. She thinks of herself as a teenager and of her sister when she looks for inspiration. “Can we relate to this? Can we find comfort in this? Can we talk about this? Is this something that can rally us to feel hopeful? If all those things are achieved, that's like check, check, check for me.” In this process Devi’s realisation of climate fiction channels her experiences of eco-anxiety to focus on practical action as intertwined with her scientific knowledge. Thus, climate fiction can really act as a way to bridge the gap between science and individuals. The more I discussed with writers, the more I realised that all the efforts they invest in research and climate communication through fiction is considered activism. As they acknowledge their own skills, writers of climate fiction decide to put them in the service of climate action. It is important to consider the role of activism and the term in the light of climate fiction discussion, as follows.

Environmental activism can be described as the employment of strategies used to shape widespread human behaviour with regard to environmental issues. Environmental activists can intentionally participate in the formation of global civil society (Wapner 1996). Activism is a form of agency, an ‘impulse to act’ in resistance to what groups or individuals consider deep flaws of society (Alexandrakis 2016). Let us consider this in relation to climate fiction. After talking about her frustration to see the loss of ecosystems as a conservationist and lack of action, Logan expressed that incorporating climate change as a theme in fictional stories can act as a more effective kind of activism than climate science:

> If it can be a conversation starter, if it can reach the people that won't read my academic papers and don't want to think about climate

> change, but if fiction sneaks information in there and gives people hope, then I definitely think that's activism and that it's worth doing.[43]

Ambre put it simply: "I absolutely believe that [stories can change the world]. You know, I could go off and do 100 different things to help with this effort. My particular talent happens to be writing stories, so I'm going to use what I do well."[44] While she also holds a PhD in environmental engineering, she decided to put her time and effort in writing fiction. Many feel like they are adding their contribution to a mosaic of existing activism. If, as mentioned in an event I attended on climate activism, campaigns are stories, then stories can act as campaigns as well.

With her easy laughter, Robin described how the idea came up to build a league of climate fiction writers. As she researched movements of civil disobedience, she came across a group called the Women Writers Suffrage League: "their mission was to set up and encourage authors who are writing fiction books to include messages or characters who are campaigning for women's suffrage within their stories, so that they could reach just the people reading those books. They thought fiction inspires empathy, and it will encourage change."[45] For Robin, climate activism is at the same stage, and "just wants to get the message out there".

Even if most of the participants felt that they did not have the political power to do what they deem that needs to be done, they aimed to do something constructive in response to the crisis (Panu 2020), which brings a feeling of efficacy that helps to cope with eco-anxiety. Reflecting on how she would have liked to find more support as a teenager to express her anxiety, Devi says: "I think discourse is a very key component of any form of activism. It's not about you being wrong and me being right. It's about whether we can come to the table together to have a conversation."[46] Influencing readers always goes beyond storytelling. Climate stories are deeply anchored in social reality. Influential writers are also known to engage in imaginary-making strategies beyond storytelling. Taking the example of Robinson and Bacigalupi, (Goodbody 2020) shows that both engage in public discourse on climate change using social and conventional media channels. Twitter, websites, public speaking and essay publications, interactions with researchers etc. Through these various forms of public communication, they not only promote the sales of their books, but repeatedly create links between their stories and the present social and political conditions. They actively encourage

[43] Logan, interview, 08.04.22
[44] Ambre, interview, 18.02.22
[45] Robin, interview, 11.03.22
[46] Devi, interview, 14.03.22

their audience to make those connections and to rethink their decisions and behaviours in light of these linkages (ibid). Similarly, the people I met have public profiles on the internet, advertising their writings and their academic works, or through youtube videos, drawings, and podcasts. They are easily connected to the world of climate fiction online, and easily approachable – informants responded positively when I contacted them, and are open to new individuals who show an interest in climate fiction.

It is important to note that many participants drew a distinction between forms of activism. Many called it "easy activism"; Trevor, Logan, and Ambre among others drew a distinction between marching in the streets and writing stories. They are aware that they are privileged, educated, and living in the West, which enables them to pick and choose a less-immediate, less embodied, less urgent form of activism. There was a distinction between embodied activism, and activism of the imagination.

During my research, I often came across the phrase "if you want to create the future, you need to imagine it first". Writers create stories in which characters embody change, which they hope will inspire readers to act. In that sense, perhaps, stories and embodied activism come together as complementary within a mosaic of activist practices. There is a sense that writing stories is not enough in itself, that it can only exist as a complement to other activist practices, both for readers and writers. Trexler (2015) argues that climate fiction can help reflect on the echoes of climate change within cultural narratives, such as nihilism, progress, collective resistance, and international cooperation. Thus, climate fiction might help build a sense of "environmental citizenship" (Dobson and Bell 2005) i.e the idea that individuals are an integral part of their environment, that the future depends on how they care for the ecosystems, and that a sense of responsibility leads to environmental activism. If campaigns themselves are stories, activists always aim to engage communities through emotions and narratives. To bring the issue closer to the community, writers must first fight with words – hoping that words will suffice before it is too late.

Rejecting dystopia

While they engage differently in their perception of their work, all of the participants agreed on rejecting dystopian narratives. As activists, writers of hopeful speculative fiction focus greatly on rejecting stories of doom, and strive to make place for positive narratives. Grace, who herself uses writing to escape her "inner apocalypse", stated that "our imagination

can be challenged in a way that engages rather than argues. Engagement through emotional connection is one of the surest ways of helping people to imagine something new and different from what they're used to through compassion."[47] Her emphasis on compassion is important. While all informants agreed that not every emotional impact creates the same results. Ross, who organises contests of climate fiction short stories, provided a valuable insight, as he explained why narratives of doom and gloom will not succeed in engaging a society locked in a socially constructed silence:

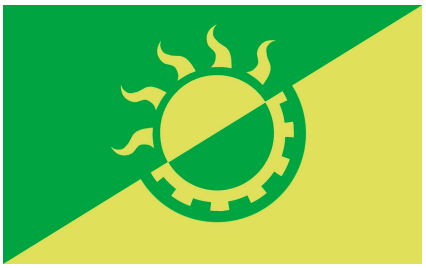
> With climate, I think the people who are in the field, [activists and eco-conscious people], many of us are mobilised by stories about catastrophe, you know, narratives of warning. But that's not true for everybody. Research shows that doom and gloom messaging, the idea of an impending catastrophe that we only have a few years to head off, that's actually profoundly disempowering and disabling for a lot of people, and it doesn't lead to political mobilisation, it doesn't lead to behaviour change. So you need these more inspiring stories.[48]

In one of the writing groups I joined, the motto is #OverDystopia. Every month, the group chooses a writing prompt based on practical and positive climate solutions[49]. Similarly, when accepting stories to post on her website, Lena rejects all dystopian narratives. There was a real consensus between the people I interviewed: Logan, Devi and Maxine explained in depth how doomsday stories lead people to think they can do anything to change it, but hopeful stories provide motivation to act. Maxine said: "I don't think it encourages any action to read books about how everyone is going to die. You want to write narratives that encourage people to take action because they feel like they're actually going to make a difference. Because there is a chance."[50] Participants helped me make a clear parallel between the effect of catastrophic news and catastrophic fictional narratives, which encourage a socially constructed silence. Thus, there is a need for a new narrative to change the story.

That is what the solarpunk movement came to represent for many. More than a literary movement, solarpunk aims at rethinking society in all areas: design, communities, city-planning, politics, economics, and so on. It is a new grid through which to see, feel, and

[47] Grace, interview, 24.03.22
[48] Ross, interview, 14.04.22
[49] See my own writings of these prompts in Appendix 3
[50] Maxine, interview, 24.04.22

create the world. "What I love about solarpunk is that it is stubbornly hopeful", said Ross. Ambre described solarpunk fiction as "a new mythos, a new way of storytelling"[51]. As we discussed the pandemic and impending invasion of Ukraine, she added with conviction: "this is why we need solarpunk: a new mythos which is cooperative, and radically compassionate".



Solarpunk flag[52]

Writing (solarpunk) stories could help moving beyond both the pessimistic narratives of decline of ecologists and redemption stories of eco-modernists, which are dominant narrative tones common in discourses related to the environment and sustainability (Di Chiro 2016). Thus, positive stories might have a stronger impact on societal consciousness in order to break the socially constructed silence and have a chance to build a collective liveable future. For Foucault, discourses are more than just language or words; they are systems of representation that produce meaning itself. They are 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault 2002 in Death 2010). In modern societies, there is a plurality of discourses which conflict and overlap in creating particular world-views (ibid). These world-views in turn influence actions and help shape societies.

According to historian Harari, stories are the key to humanity's success because they provide us with our unique ability to flexibly cooperate in large groups. In his book, Sapiens (2014, 21), Harari writes: "Fiction has enabled us not merely to imagine things, but to do so collectively. We can weave common myths such as the biblical creation story, the Dreamtime myths of Aboriginal Australians, and the nationalist myths of modern states. Such myths give Sapiens the unprecedented ability to cooperate flexibly in large numbers." This is a view of stories, broadly construed, as a social, emotional, and motivational technology that enables

[51] Ambre, interview, 18.02.22

[52] "The yellow of the solarpunk flag represents the solar power portion of the solarpunk movement, and the green represents sustainability. The half-gear symbolises a reclaiming of technology for sustainable projects and infrastructure, and the sunbeams represent the hopefulness and futurism of the solarpunk movement." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solarpunk Accessed 01.07.2022

the achievement of collective goals. This view of stories is important if we consider climate fiction, as it tries to offer the tools to build a collective, fair future for all through fiction.

Writers of hopeful speculative fiction try to stir this powerful collective imagination in a certain direction, far from the doom and gloom of news and stories. Robin provided a perfect example of this, in March, during a zoom call. Sitting in front of a bookshelf, punctuating her sentences with short bits of happy laughter, Robin told me she believed that it is possible to move from a dystopian to an optimistic future, if only we change the story. Crossing her hands under her chin, she explained she had recently worked on editing a climate fiction anthology. "One of the authors pitched an idea set in the future about a farm that had been destroyed by extreme weather, and the characters had to try and restore some of the damage." When she read the story, Robin could feel that something was missing. She called the author back on the next day: "How about, instead of the farm being hit by extreme weather and getting damaged, you set this in a world where the government has helped the farm to get protections, to prevent it from getting damaged? And despite this help, an antagonist gets through, and the farm still gets damaged." Robin's voice had raised in excitement. "Do you see? It transforms the whole story: yes, the farm is getting ruined either way, damage occurs – damage is always going to occur – but it occurs in a world where the government has helped provide grants to keep it safe."[53] This way, Robin tells me, blinking rapidly, the narrative shifts from a world without hope to a more optimistic world. "From a fictional perspective, you can still have a story where things happen, but it is a more optimistic story. The reader goes out of the book with the idea that the farms aren't doomed. It is helpful thinking, because then we can act to make that reality happen. Like God, it would be great if in five years the government gave every farm a grant to help put things in place to make sure they had enough water, or they had enough trees in their fields for sun protection."

Robin's example shows how writers of hopeful speculative fiction try to change the narrative. Playing with the fate of their characters is intimately linked to the fate of readers: by refusing dystopia and writing a more optimistic future, writers hope that readers will pick up on small cues and act. This gentle nudging and persuading through writing can be a powerful and subtle form of activism, both for readers and for writers themselves. In order for people to see themselves as social and environmental change agents, Di Chiro (2016) states that a sense of active hope is fostered by using writing as a learning tool for resilience, creativity and empowerment. Narratives call on readers to explore their personal histories,

[53] Robin, interview, 11.03.22

which in turn encourages the idea that they themselves are endowed with a proactive identity that might go against the usual feelings of despair and cynicism. By examining their own 'enabling entanglements' (Tsing in Di Chiro 2016), life experiences and choices, individuals can find their own personal ways of resisting "the hopelessness of the Anthropocene narrative", and to imagine more critical, embodied, and collaborative theories and engagements. Thus, individuals can make the choice to turn to solarpunk to find visions for a different kind of future than the one offered by the current neoliberal system.

Chapter conclusion

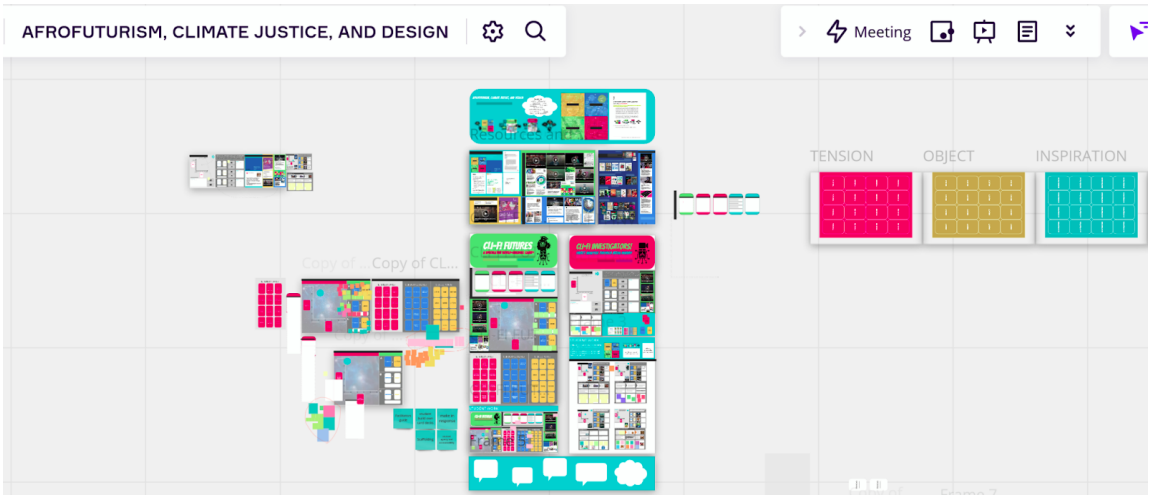
In this chapter, I outlined how the combination of science, creativity and action is an inherent part of the process of writing climate fiction. As they engage in a process of scientific research and emotional connection with readers, participants become activists - they write stories going against the current system in order to provide hopeful ideas of the future, and reshape society. In Chapter 3, I will delve more into this concept of system change. Showing how writing climate fiction is a process of quantum social change (O'Brien et al 2019) which rethinks the whole of society. I will show climate fiction can help build resilient communities, and give individuals a sense of belonging in the world.

CHAPTER 3 | Resisting capitalism

"We all have agency over what the future can bring. Each of us individually can shape not only our personal future, but the future that we all live in. And the object of tonight is to get you to imagine, to get you out of the frame of reference of what you think your future might be, and get as creative as possible. Let us see what we can build using that imagination and speculative thought. We might come up with some cool stuff! I want to make sure everybody just talks comfortably. The discussion part of it is just as important as the rest of the game, maybe even more important."

Dana's dark eyelashes catch the light as she draws closer to the screen. She laughs: "Ok, guys, careful, I am scrolling up again!"

I close my eyes, knowing the tricky effects Miro can have, scrolling up and down and up and down, making people nauseous during school presentations or, in this case, while playing a game. It is a cold evening in February and as I spend most of my days sitting down in front of my laptop, I keep a small beige blanket at hand. I grab it to cover my shoulders, as Dana continues: "All good now." I open my eyes, looking at the colourful cards that appeared on the Miro board. "We have tension cards, inspiration cards, and object cards. We have to choose two tension cards. They are going to establish the parameters of our universe." Our group chooses black Feminist leadership and social justice. "In our universe we will live all along the spectrum of those two choices. So now you guys let us look at inspiration cards, and let us start playing!"



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“So we have sustainable housing, what goes next to it? Cup, shoes or uniform?”

I unmute myself: “Cup”

“Ok, we have sustainable housing and cups. Then we have food systems and…?”

“Uniform”, Bridget writes in the chat.

“Oh, this is interesting,” Dana says excitedly “I've never seen this permutation before. So let's think about sustainable housing and cups and a world where the wind is blowing and the seas are rising. It's hot or cold… or hot and cold.” She laughs. “But you have a lot of privacy; nobody knows what you're up to, ever.”

There is silence. I am not entirely sure how to play the game yet, despite the previous explanations.

“Can you give us an example?” Sofi asks.

Raja smiles her contagious smile. “Sure! You know, sometimes when it's cold outside you want to have a hot drink. So what if there's a cup that's responsive to the

environment? Like a temperature changing cup so that what I'm eating or drinking is appropriate to the weather because I never know what's going to be. And I'm okay with having a smart cup because it's the only cup I have, because I live in sustainable housing."

Romee jumps in hesitantly: "Maybe it should be indestructible then if it's your only one?"

"Yeah!" Dana exclaims. "Oh, Britney wrote in the chat". She reads under her breath, then exclaims "Oh, so the cup is teaching me! Okay, it's letting me know about the impact of what I drink." Dana types the new idea in a pink card on the Miro board. "I'm wondering if it can be a cup that is responsive to certain pollutants, right?" She sees us nod and she adds it on the card, her long nails clicking on the keyboard.

"Alright, so now let's look at food systems in that same world. We have uniforms. But we also have a world where we have lots of climate change. How are those two things combined?"

Britney turns on her camera and gives the idea of a modular uniform that could be waterproof. I add that perhaps the uniform could be made of seaweed leather, since it is a sustainable material.

"Oh yeah! Especially since we're gonna have a lot more coastline" Dana laughs, and I see other people smile.

For a few minutes we keep playing around the idea of the uniform and privacy, thinking of a uniform that could mask gender or race. Dana jots down ideas on the cards as we talk, her communicative laugh making me feel light, and the cards slowly getting filled on the screen.

"Alright, now, pandemic shoes. We're in a world where the climate has gotten worse than it is now, more unpredictable, more extreme. And we also have the most amount of privacy possible."

We throw ideas for sanitising shoes, or shoes that can contact trace without identifying the person. Dana types, her eyes scanning the chat at the same time.

"Oh yes, Renee wrote, the shoes could let you know, based on where you are, how hot the areas are. Yes! Or maybe it can even give you instantaneous weather warnings. Like, there's a storm coming, hide!"

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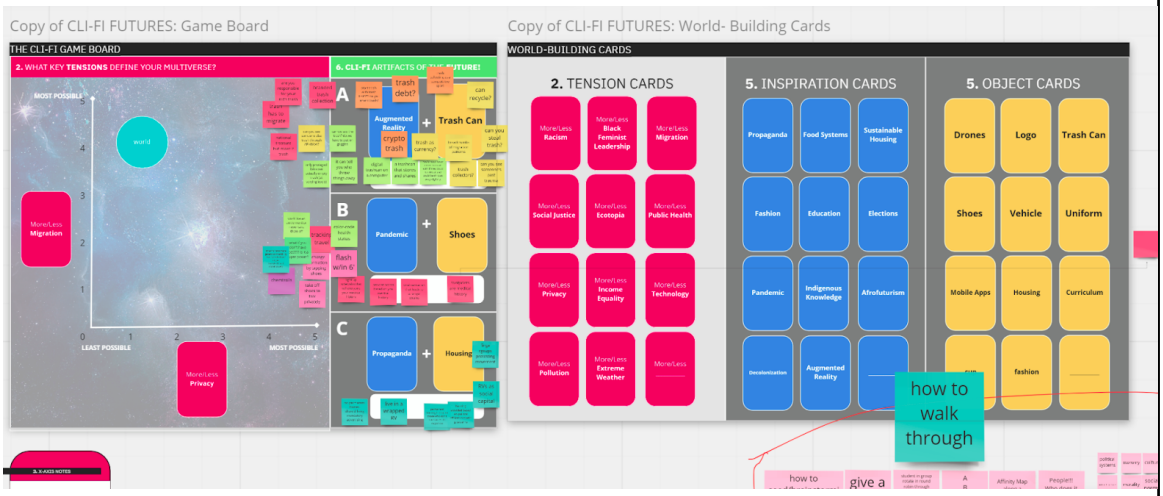
"Cool! You can sort of see how playing around with this allows us to generate ideas pretty quickly. There are so many other layers to add to this other than looking at the tensions, which could include determining some power structures or economic structures. (...) I'm hoping that you all enjoyed this and that it will help you think about the implications of what that future world might be… And please, play with others!"



Cli-fi futures: a speculative board game[54]

"Play with others", Dana urged us. The act of imagining the future must be a collective act. As stories enable the achievement of collective goals (Harari 2014), the more people believe in a possibility of a sustainable future, the more this story might become a reality. Words might hold more power than numbers when it comes to building an emotional

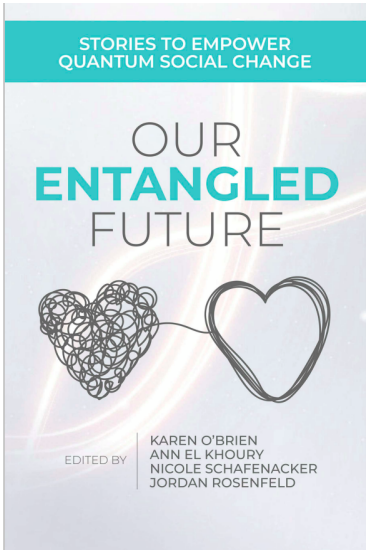
[54] Accessed during a workshop on Afrofuturism, Climate justice and Design, February 2022

connection with readers, but numbers matter when it comes to how many individuals engage in building the future that is being imagined in these stories.

Climate fiction gives keys to think about how to collectively create this future. It offers prompts, social and scientific solutions, and encourages the arts of the imagination. The game I just mentioned aims to keep elements of realism, as it brings in tension cards (which include racism, migration or extreme weather, for example) which will set the parameters of the world we are building. Playing around strict tension parameters enables players to imagine different kinds of futures, which present various challenges. Once tensions are set, players can bring in inspiration cards and object cards, and try to find solutions to live in this world. As a group, we individually offered ideas, and built up on each other's suggestions. We collectively created a world based on the tensions we had, and we did so in a way that was engaging, fun, and did not provoke anxiety.

This game is built to be played with a real-life audience, or in schools. It gives a framework for collective, engaged imagination. Like fiction, it offers a space for discussion, building new ideas, and connecting with others, all while building a collective vision for the future.

In Chapter 3, building on the concepts of "socio-climatic imaginaries" (Milkoreit 2017) and "quantum social change" (O'Brien et al 2019), I will show that writing climate fiction is a political act, which aims to resist the current neoliberal system, striving to empower all individuals. Coming from the bottom-up, climate fiction creates entanglements between people and nature, with the urgent aim of building resilient and fair communities, striving to include all voices to create a collective narrative for the future. Taking the example of solarpunk in particular, I outline how climate fiction interweaves temporalities, species and generations to create an intergenerational, multitemporal, and multispecies vision of the future, fair for all.



Cover of an anthology of climate fiction stories
focusing on quantum social change[55]

1 | Quantum social change

Along with a crisis of the imagination (Ghosh 2016), there is a crisis of responsibility. In an increasingly disconnected world, people find it hard to see the links between their actions and the consequences of climate change. Humans of the Global North have kept themselves busy with scientific and sensational language for a long time (Serres 1995). Those who have the power to talk are administrators, journalists, and scientists. These people are partly responsible for climate change and do not know how to find reasonable solutions because they are constrained by short-lived powers and narrow domains. Individuals of the Global North are led to believe that the issue of what happens to the world lies beyond them (Latour 2017), creating a "broken chain of responsibility" (Eriksen 2018).

How do we, as individuals and society, fix this broken chain of responsibility? We have outlined that climate fiction could bring an emotional connection that makes people feel closer to their surroundings and to the state of the world. However, there are still many barriers to face, such as gatekeepers to consider within the publishing industry itself. As the publishing industries themselves are part of a capitalist system, many of my informants thought that bringing climate stories to the world through publishing can prove difficult, especially stories that are hopeful and part of the solarpunk movement. As a published writer who opened up a website to welcome climate fiction stories, Robin expressed her frustration, shaking her head: "Most of the applications I get and the books that I process from the

[55] https://cchange.no/ourentangledfuture/ Accessed on 01.07.2022

website are just dystopians, they don't have any political element at all. They're just survival, which really frustrates me because surely all the publishers already have them. Why are they still acquiring them?"[56] Thus, the role of the publishing industry matters, as it could help empower the hopeful speculative fiction movement. Milkoreit (2017) states that publishers and editors are the gatekeepers of story power, although self-publishing is increasingly popular. Because their policies and decisions are embedded in the global political economy of book markets, it creates a powerful structural constraint on any author. Gatekeepers of stories (both publishers and authors) have a responsibility to go beyond the conventional way of understanding what is represented legitimately, and find new ways to tell the story.

System change, then, once again, appears as a solution. Writers and activists can use technology to shape their political power, and that of their stories. "For example, changing technologies for distributing and reading stories (e.g., the e-book, self-publishing etc.) can increase authors' reach, circumventing the gate-keeping power of print publishers". (Milkoreit 2017, 11). They take the matter into their own hands. This in turn enables more diverse and accessible stories– but perhaps, I argue, it holds less political power, as the people likely to read them are people who already have an internet in solarpunk and hopeful speculative fiction.

The game at the beginning of this chapter is a strong example of the development of a socio-climatic imaginary, a term introduced by Milkoreit (2017), which distinguishes two dimensions of the imagination. The first is the cognitive-emotional processes that generate imagination in individual minds – which happens upon reading climate fiction, for example, or when choosing prompts for the game. The second is "the socio-political processes that produce shared imaginations within a group or society, including imaginaries – bounded, and emotionally coherent sets of ideas about possible futures" (2017, 4), which happens when discussing a climate fiction book with others, for example, or when playing the game collectively. "When it comes to socio-climatic imaginaries, we collectively attempt to create shared meaning about non-existent things: futures that have not yet come to pass" (ibid).

Milkoreit's theory of socio-climatic imaginaries carefully considers the dynamic intertwinings between the cognitive and social scales. It argues that fiction can play an interesting role in shaping both cognitive-individual and social-collective imagination processes. As outlined in the previous chapters, one must consider these linkages, as eco-anxiety, activism and the imagination, are processes that shape both the individual and

[56] Robin, interview, 11.03.22

the collective. Climate fiction stories and the act of the imagination is not just a game. People who engage in building socio-climatic imaginaries, as we have outlined, consider it as activism. And for many, the aim of this activism is clear: system change.

"Why is it easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism?" climate activists often ask. System change requires rethinking everything. Before we started playing, Dana said: "How are we thinking about what the future might hold and how the ends justify the means? Are we prepared for the radical decisions that we might have to make in order to correct things that we're doing now?"[57]. Climate change is anything but fiction, stated O'Brien et al in their climate fiction anthology: "Real stories of risk, danger, and loss are conveyed to us daily" (2019, 1), and protagonists who are taking action are numerous; farmers, firefighters, elected officials, activists, and those of us who have a stake in maintaining a planet that is hospitable to life. While there are also many antagonists, such as the oil industry, capitalism, or individuals who believe in paradigms of progress, endless consumption, unlimited growth or in techno-optimism (ibid), the story is far from being a Manichean story, as people and processes are constantly shifting.

O'Brien et al (2019) advocate for "quantum social change", which recognizes that our deepest values and intentions are the source of individual change, collective change, and systems change. Breaking away from a deterministic approach to climate change, quantum social change calls for humanity to activate a new paradigm. "Drawing on metaphors from quantum physics, quantum social change recognizes the potential for transformations such as entanglement, the wave-particle duality, complementarity, superposition and not the least, by generating a metaphorical *quantum leap*." (ibid, 4). What this means for writers is the encouragement to try new narrative arcs, images and metaphors which allow us "to imagine a possible trajectory for the story of our time and our individual roles in weaving this future" (ibid, 8).

Climate fiction requires writers to rethink their beliefs. Ambre told me: "As a writer, you're digging up from the inside of producing stories, so when you're mining all that, you're like, not this and not that because I can see it is really problematic. That is not what I want to replicate. Breaking those rules and creating new stories is incredibly difficult work, which is why it's struggling to be born. And every piece of it is a contribution, you know?"[58] I nodded, thinking of Ghosh's statement that there is a "crisis of the imagination" in the arts, and that

[57] Dana, workshop, 24.02.22
[58] Ambre, interview, 18.02.22

fictional stories on climate change are still not representing the space it should take in the public debate.

The politics of climate fiction[59]

Fictional stories and embodied social change are intertwined. Stories reveal temporary and human interconnections, which in turn allows readers to foster new relationships between each other and the world they inhabit, and to participate in the world that is becoming (O'Brien et al 2019). Fictional narratives in particular have strong potential in world-making. "Readers and writers are entangled in acts of meaning-making; stories are at once individual and collective cultural acts" (ibid, 6). A prime example of this quantum social change is the "eco-future movement of practical utopianism" (O'Brien et al 2019) called solarpunk, which Ross and Ambre described in chapter 2 as "stubbornly optimistic". Solarpunk focuses on thriveability and generativity, and brings entanglements to life for the reader.

> In contrast to the darkness of popular apocalyptic science fiction, solarpunk offers more viable, optimistic stories about the near-futures and coping with the climate crisis, with the goal of encouraging and inspiring people to change the present. Recognizing that political, social and cultural shifts will be necessary for more sustainable futures, it deploys radical optimism to bring greener futures into being. (O'Brien et al 2019, 3).

As outlined previously, solarpunk goes beyond focusing on optimistic stories: "It is at once a countercultural movement, an adaptation art form, and a form of futurism that focuses on what we should hope for rather than on what to avoid." (ibid, 4). Solarpunk rethinks all areas of society, as shown by the design-oriented Imagine Project[60], which takes the power of the imagination outside of literary narratives. By intertwining a utopian vision of the future and the consequences of our contemporary actions, authors can show entanglements of social change and climate activism, all while encouraging a strong sense of compassion. Stories and metaphors become intertwined, and solarpunk becomes a part of how one decides to live their life. Vilde explains how it affects her choices:

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[59] Milkoreit (2017)
[60] The Imagine Project Official (canva.com) Accessed 20.06.2022

> Whatever happens, how we deal with the situation feels very important. Do we choose solidarity, do we choose community, do we choose to support each other or, you know, will it just be a competition and everyone tries to grab on to the world that is left, the continuation of this scarcity mind? So the story itself has to feels important, you know, not just the end of the story. My hope is not that it will all solve itself. It's, just, whatever happens, that we as humanity rise to the challenge and at least take care of each other in these situations that will occur… And, we're here now so we can just all enjoy the ocean and nature and the land and community and all the things that feel good, and what gives me hope or motivation is seeing that these things are happening, that there are people and communities that are doing this.[61]

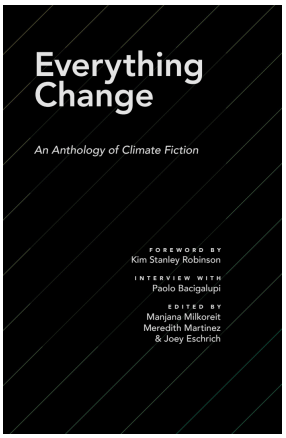
In that sense, solarpunk is deeply rooted in system change, and the politics of the imagination (Milkoreit 2017) are imbued within climate fiction. By imagining a collective, utopian future, away from the current system, stories are political and anti-capitalist. "The inherently value-laden and hence political nature of the imaginary is what drives the politics of future-making" (ibid, 61). Being able to imagine a better future, individually and collectively, is a political act.

Inclusive stories

Solarpunk fiction rethinks current power structures to create fairer societies for all. As Ross, who works in an academic organisation in the US collecting hopeful climate stories puts it: "speculative fiction certainly is both a global phenomenon and a kind of small community, a small town"[62]. However, this small community aims to expand. By nature, the movement aims to be as diverse as possible. Solarpunk narratives bring to life a vibrant diversity of characters; the story 'Tidings'[63] by Rich Larson, for example, introduces a vibrant diversity of characters to life in a series of vignettes set in the future. In the Solarpunk Storytelling Showcase[64], organised by XR Wordsmith - a branch of the activist group Extinction Rebellion – many of the stories also revolve around the construction of a world

[61] Vilde, interview, 30.03.22
[62] Ross, interview, 24.03.22
[63] https://grist.org/fix/imagine-2200-climate-fiction-tidings/, Accessed on 01.07.22
[64] http://www.solarpunkstorytelling.com/ Accessed on 20.06.2022

freed from most of our current social and ecological issues, in which all voices are finally able to be heard and respected. "BIPOC [black, indigenous and people of colour] and queer people are safe in solarpunk futures," says Brianna Castagnozzi, co-editor-in-chief of Solarpunk Magazine. In events I attended, many of the people used they/them pronouns, and participants were mindful of how to address others. As a writer of solarpunk books, Ambre explained: "[Diversity] is stitched in the DNA of solarpunk. It has to be representative of the whole spectrum of humanity"[65]. In Solarpunk, power and diversity are intimately intertwined. Drawing on Foucault's theory of dominant narratives and the power of who controls the narratives, solarpunk aims to build a narrative that can be co-created by as many people as possible.



Cover of a climate fiction anthology[66]

Empowering individuals

Because of this, many people involved in the movement of hopeful speculative fiction wish to collect a diversity of voices to make sure that the act of changing the narrative comes from a diverse and empowered group of individuals. Several participants have founded organisations aiming to encourage others to tell their own stories.

Vilde grew up on a farm in Western Norway. Ten years ago, parts of the farm were sold to developers and turned into vacation homes. Vilde could not prevent it from happening, and for years she chose to ignore the vacation owners. In the summer she would work "in front of these panorama windows, sweating, while people sat on their porches". One day, she decided she couldn't ignore them anymore. She started to engage with them. She decided she could be a facilitator, helping them build a connection to this particular land. She started

[65] Ambre, interview, 18.02.22
[66] https://climateimag.wpengine.com/everything-change/ Accessed on 01.07.2022

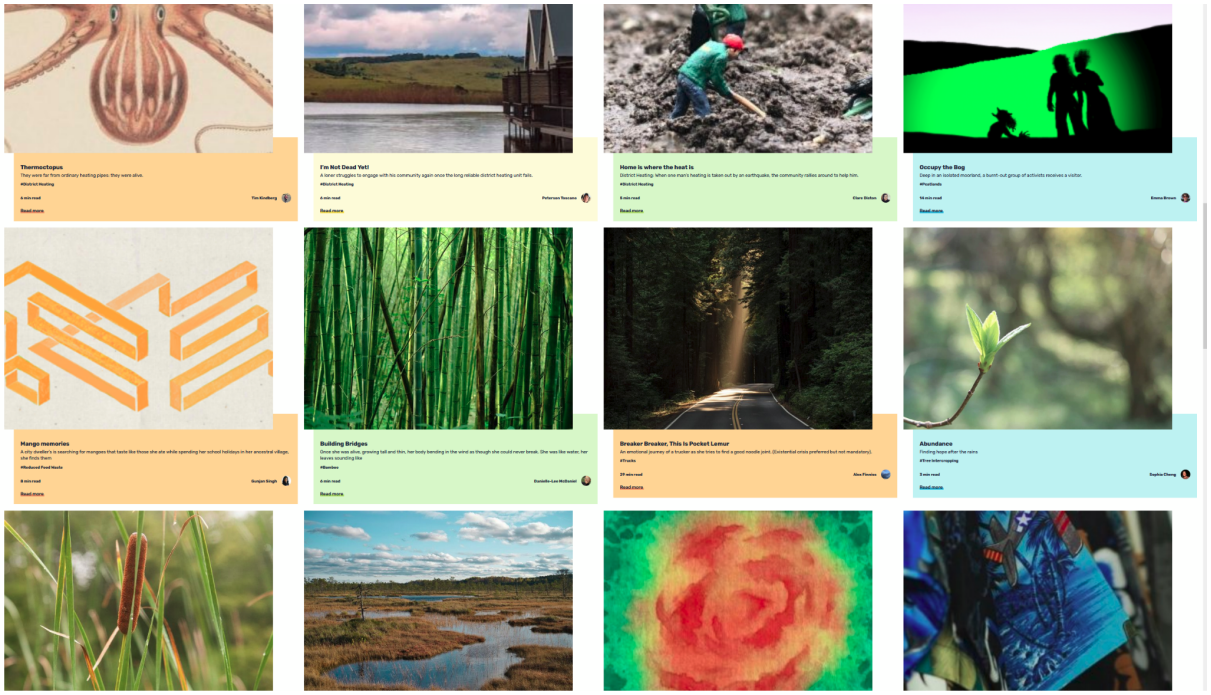
making lists, taking photos of all the flowers present around the farm in order for them to get a more precise idea of which plants they can grow themselves.

> You know, then they can participate. If they see a flower that is not on the list, they can take a photo and add it to the list. I will start it, but they can also help, co-create if they want to. Because I don't think they see all the flowers that are there. I don't think they see the insects and the different bumblebees. Capitalism creates so much conflict. In this story I want my role to be the person who finds a way of resisting, of healing our relationships to each other and the land and nature.[67]

The way Vilde approaches the situation of the farm is the same way she engages with climate change. She wants to resist despair, keep working, and co-create. She funded a website that focuses on creating hopeful stories for the future, and that facilitates workshops for young people around the world. By collecting people's stories, she wants people to reflect on their own role in co-creating the future: "The kind of stories that we feature can be hard to write because they require you to reflect on your own story. There's this emotional dimension, it requires you to think of how you feel." Similarly, Ross works for an organisation which organises climate fiction contests. He says that empowering as many people as possible is the core aim: "Hopefully, what we're doing is supporting an environment where there's like, critical and inclusive conversations going on around these issues, and that people feel a little bit more equipped to participate [in the climate conversation]."[68] Drawing on sociologist Marshall Ganz' idea of 'public narrative,' many environmental and climate justice activists are developing a strategy that prioritises story and relationship, aimed at connecting people to their source of passion, to shared identity, and most of all, to hope (Di Chiro 2015). The public narrative strategy starts with individuals telling their own stories, and then moves to sharing stories of how we are entangled and what we have in common. Drawing on the dynamics that emerges in spaces when stories are shared, the story of the group shifts "to co-construct a story of 'Now': the way individual and group stories become stories of a broader movement identifying what we are called to do right now and how we can take action together" (ibid, 72). Empowering people is key. Vilde said: "We have this idea that to act or to make a difference you have to be[come] an adult or a politician but a lot of the stories on [our

[67] Vilde, interview, 30.03.22
[68] Ross, interview, 24.03.22

website] are from young people reaching the conclusion that they can take action now."[69] In this global crisis, anyone and everyone can act to change the public narrative.



Mosaic of submitted climate fiction short stories written during workshops[70]

[69] Vilde, interview, 30.03.22
[70] https://www.withmanyroots.com/cli-fi-imaginarium/ Accessed 01.07.2022

2 | Building communities

Writing can be an isolating practice, and joining events can help in being reminded of the meaning of writing hopeful stories. Vilde explained that is why she needs a community: "That is a place where I can feel empowered, and it is the same with narratives we tell ourselves. Like, in our stories, are we alone or are we in a community? Because working on these issues, it can feel a bit lonely, you know."[71] Communities are being built, slowly, both offline and online. Participating in online events is a way to create a feeling of belonging with others, I noticed when reading the chats: people exchanged contacts, thanked others for their inputs, and planned to meet in later events. After we had both been part of an event in which we were invited to write our own stories, Sam said: "People are genuinely happy to be together. It's very empowering. And that's amazing, because I feel so so much of the crisis is about feeling hopeless, and helpless, really. And it's just so good to meet people that are like, yeah, we can do something about it, together." I felt it myself; by the end of my fieldwork, as I joined a particular event, I realised I had spoken, exchanged thoughts, or had an interview with almost all of the participants at some point or another, and that I felt comfortable in that space.

Communities are created by sharing powerful visions of the future, local and global. Vilde added "I definitely feel I have the power to create, you know, change in many ways. But I think when working with climate change there's always this feeling like you know, will it be enough? There are always limits to what you can do, and I think that's really the importance of community."[72] In that sense, being part of the climate fiction movement can help foster a sense of belonging.

Both quantum social change and the solarpunk movement aim to awaken a sense of belonging in this world "as we collectively transform it by bringing together tenderness of heart, embodied listening, and conscious action" (ibid). *Being* solarpunk might be an answer to acute feelings of eco-anxiety, in particular *solastalgia*, a term coined by Albrecht in 2006, which means feeling homesick even though you are at home. In a burning, quickly transforming planet, perhaps stories can help create a sense of belonging, both through showing possible futures we can create and inhabit, and by creating communities.

[71] Vilde, interview, 30.03.22
[72] ibid

Stories from future ancestors[73]

These communities are deeply aware of their own place within time, and what links them to future generations. Ambre said: "I think 30 years from now people are going to go like *Oh my God, what took you so long to figure out how to do this?*" Ghosh (2018) stated that generations of the future will look back one day and struggle to find narratives that foreshadow what they are living. However, climate fiction can help reconnect generations and act as the stories from 'future ancestors'. It is a way of reclaiming intergenerational dialogue, a link between now and then, between the present and the future, showing us how much all of our fates – as well as nature's fate – are intertwined. Perhaps, if we now use the power of our imagination to write about the future of generations not yet born, climate fiction acts their parrhesiaic speech (Howe 2015). As a form of speech, parrhesia is inherently linked to truth because the life of its actor is in a state of subordination and may be endangered, which brings forth ethical concerns. Here, parrhesia is enunciated through people's and the planet's threatened status and through environmental management regimes that "seek to synchronise human and nonhuman life in settings of both local and global ecological failures" (Howe 2015, 161). Perhaps climate fiction acts as the parrhesiaic speech of people already suffering from the effects of climate change as well as people who are bound to suffer if we keep the current narrative of growth. During fieldwork, I often encountered the metaphor of the "seeds of hope" to talk about climate fiction stories. Nixon (2011, 134), who discusses environmental activism, states that "to plant a tree is an act of intergenerational optimism, a selfless act at once practical and utopian, an investment in a communal future the planter will not see; to plant a tree is to offer shade to unborn strangers." (Nixon 2011, 134). Perhaps, similarly, climate fiction stories act as a relief for future generations, offering shade and preparing a better future.

In the present time, the education of young people is an important part of creating socio-climatic imaginaries. Entanglements are intergenerational and global, and all writers agreed that there is a need for climate education at all levels. Organisations are trying to encourage hopeful climate education for young people. Lena is the co-founder of a UK based community group, which focuses on climate communication through creative workshops, as well as education. They ask teachers or parents to run an activity in their school in which they get pupils from five to eleven years old to imagine they travel to the future.

[73] The term 'future ancestors' appears in the climate fiction contest held by Fix (https://grist.org/fix/series/imagine-2200-climate-fiction/)

> It's perfect for kids. Because it is only when you get older that you start to have the limits imposed on you. If it is in a physical space, even better, you know, get the kids moving, jump into the time machine, the more interactive, the better. We get them to picture the space around them, think about engaging all of their senses, what can they see and hear and smell, and then, they write a postcard home, from the future to the present day.[74]

Lena shared how heartbreaking it is to see postcards of children that depict the future as a dystopian, barren wasteland. It motivates her even more to try and change this vision of things, and motivate others to act for a positive future. Lena's team encourages teachers and parents to go further, linking them to resources from professionals. Once again, we see that stories lead to a bigger social movement, of engagement and activism.

Many informants also wished to see climate fiction in school curriculums, to answer unaddressed fears of younger people, in order "to get young people thinking about what's possible, what they want, rather than just being narrowly told the future is going to be pretty bad."[75] These stories aim to engage people from backgrounds, all generations, and all paths of life into action. But it does not only focus on the human.

Multi-species constellations

The sense of inclusivity encouraged by solarpunk goes beyond the human. It is composed of multi-community constellations. It aims to create a multi-species, enlightened anthropocentrism, looking at facts from an environmental justice lens. It looks at the interconnected worlds of humans and multi-species to co-create stories of resurgence (Di Chiro 2016). Telling different kinds of stories might help to live together in a changing world and switch narratives for the future, building alliances for 'collaborative survival' (Tsing 2015, 28). The story Tidings, that we mentioned earlier, depicts a futuristic world in which technology, humans and nature are closely intertwined:

> Nam blinks — sometimes the babeltech goes far afield with dolphin vocabulary. But the enthusiasm is clear, so she takes the extra nerve

[74] Lena, interview, 28.04.22
[75] Logan, interview, 08.04.22

> suit, the one she dissected and reassembled and waterproofed, and helps web it across Truth's rubbery pink body. The other dolphins swirl around, curious. (...)
>
> Nam is in the water, feeling the cool lap against Truth's blubber-sheathed body, seeing through Truth's low-light eyes. Nam is a good swimmer. She relishes the feel of a perfect stroke, her whole body working in harmony, from her cupped hand biting the surface to her flexed feet knifing through it.[76]

Here, multispecies voices help shed the light on different "value scales" (Stengers 2011) and, as modern readers, can help us see how clashes within these scales are brought forward by the increasing realisation of the impossibility of continued growth for a sustainable future (Eriksen 2016). Solarpunk stories aim to empower nature as well as people. In a short story from Maxine, who writes for children, a girl finds glasses that enable her to see different levels of natural systems which communicate with her in different ways, such as the ghost of a stream that used to run through the city. "It helps her realise all the different ways that nature is contributing to our lives. Seeing with new eyes enables her to see hidden dimensions, and powers in nature that we're not appreciating. And yes, I know, the metaphor of the glasses is pretty top-heavy"[77] Maxine laughs. Nature is present in all hopeful climate fiction, as it recognises and interweaves the intelligence imbued in natural systems and technology. No future is imagined without it, and the intertwinings between human and nature is always encouraged. Many informants were themselves involved with nature on a daily basis; they did gardening, were involved in rewilding projects, took walks in forests or described their favourite natural spot in their local area. Once again, we see that climate fiction aims to create links in order to go against the broken chain of responsibility. It engages, connects, and interweaves temporalities and beings.

Chapter conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the way climate fiction is deeply interwoven with a desire for system change. It strives for a fair, inclusive future, away from the sharp individualistic narrative of capitalism. Taking all lives and voices into account, it creates a

[76] Tidings by Rich Larson, https://grist.org/fix/imagine-2200-climate-fiction-tidings/ Accessed on 01.07.22
[77] Maxine, interview, 21.04.22

discussion with future generations and with non-human species, by bringing their parrhesiaic speech into the current narrative. This way, solarpunk aims to empower all and every individual, so that the act of creating the future becomes a truly collective act, coming from all people. Using the concepts of "socio-climatic imaginaries" and "quantum social change", I have outlined how writing climate fiction is a deeply political act. Focusing in particular on solarpunk, I have shown how the desire to build resilient communities is at the heart of the movement. The core aim of climate fiction is to create links, interweaving lives - between readers and character, future ancestors and future generations, all species, and all people. Distinctions disappear as we all face the same threat, and as we are all building a collective future.

Multi-species entanglements in a submitted climate fiction story[78]

[78] Author: Mike McClelland / Artist: Amelia Bates
https://grist.org/fix/imagine-2200-climate-fiction-secrets-of-the-last-greenland-shark/ Accessed on 01.07.2022

Conclusion

The art of climate fiction is an open and inclusive field. Calling for entanglements, writers of hopeful climate fiction aim to rethink the world we live in – intertwining nature, people, technology, and the arts. Climate fiction is about reclaiming power and changing the system, and for that, all ideas based on compassion, education and inspiration are welcome in a constantly growing community of committed individuals.

In this thesis, I have outlined in which ways climate fiction negotiates processes of agency and resistance. In an overheating planet (Eriksen 2016), climate fiction writers call for a shift of perspective, a focus on habitability (Chakrabarty 2021). While we live in catastrophic times (Stengers 2015), climate fiction writers argue that not all is lost. We have to stay with the trouble (Haraway 2018), take a deep breath, and use our imagination to change the narrative. Climate fiction is about reclaiming power and rewriting the narrative, both at the individual level to process feelings of eco-anxiety, at the institutional level, and at a systemic level, with the ultimate goal to imagine a world that does not rely on capitalism. It is a call for a diverse, powerful rewilding of stories and relationships, a call for a world in which all humans recognise their own potential in co-creating the future.

The processes of writing climate fiction engages several acts of resistance. Firstly, individuals have to face their own feelings of eco-anxiety, and resist the individualisation of risk imposed on them by the current neoliberal system. Climate fiction writing requires individuals to embrace their feelings of grief and guilt in order to act. They have to resist the tragic narrative presented by the news in order to create another kind of narrative. Writing about the climate crisis through lived experiences and identities (whether real or fictional) can provide a liminal space for people to engage in the climate issue without engaging in anxiety-provoking news. In this way, they reclaim power over their own present and future lived experiences.

This then requires them to engage in a constant process of reshaping their daily habitus, by resisting the current narrative of despair. Engaging in a process of resisting dystopia, individuals focus on what is good around them, and include these positive notes in their stories. This positivity is interwoven with science, as individuals commit to thorough research in order to make their stories realistic and inspiring for tangible climate action. Climate fiction acts as a locus for people's imagination, and aims to affect decision making,

showing that different sets of individual and collective decisions can steer humanity to many different kinds of future. As such, writers themselves engage in environmental activism.

This process of activism is part of a broader set of actions calling for system change. I have outlined that climate fiction is a political act, anti-capitalistic by nature, as it aims to create a fair, equal society for all, away from the individualist narrative of risk and gain. It aims to deconstruct, to go beyond predictable tropes and allegories, both in the fictional narrative and in the society it permeates. It also aims to construct: one of the main aims of climate fiction is to create resilient communities, composed of committed, informed, and inspired individuals. It builds arenas and communities for collaborative work, creating a space for people to tell stories that they think is urgent. The future(s) imagined by climate fiction are a collective act, it is to be shared and co-created. In this way, climate fiction goes beyond the here and now. Drawing on the metaphor of the "seeds of hope", it includes the voices of future generations, a parrhesiaic speech that enables readers to become "future ancestors". Writers hope that their work will help stear long-term thinking systemically. What is more, I have shown that climate fiction, and solarpunk in particular, is deeply inclusive by nature. Writing visions of the future that are inclusive and inspiring helps writers sort through beliefs, bias and inequity, and will hopefully inspire readers to do the same. It encourages a conversation between all beings, past, present, and to come. It intertwines multi-species, multi-cultural and multi-generational knowledge to create a tapestry of stories, a collective act from which the future can be born safely, and reimagined again, and again, by all.

In this way, all individuals can reclaim the power of discourse in order to rethink the world. As participants told me, if you can imagine it, then you can create it. And in the meantime, these processes of deep compassion and optimism make the present a better place.

Different aspects of climate fiction could be included in future ethnographic research. Writing has its limitations. While this research did not focus on audiovisual media, it could help move hopeful climate narratives forward in social consciousness. Means and technologies, as well the role of gatekeepers within the audiovisual media industry, are many barriers to think of in future studies. What is more, engaging a broader set of perspectives would prove valuable to future ethnographic research, as most of my interviewed participants were from the Global North. As climate fiction aims to be a diverse movement, ethnographers should try and bring a diversity of voices to the discussion on climate fiction.

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APPENDIX 1 | Contact messages

1. Example of contact via email:

Dear team [of organisation],

My name is Lili Ainseba, and I am doing anthropological research focusing on sustainability at Utrecht University. Being fascinated with the power of creativity in challenging times, I look at the links between storytelling, activism, and future-building. I focus in particular on climate fiction/solarpunk, researching how and why people write hopeful narratives in our current system.

I am registered for tomorrow's event "[name of the event]" and I look forward to it! Afterwards, if possible, I would love to have a talk with you about your projects, your thoughts on creativity, community and climate change, and the anthology. It would be extremely valuable, helping me bring more depth to my research. All data would be anonymised.

Please feel free to contact me with any question/suggestion,

Kind regards,

Lili

1. Example of message in an event zoom chat:

Hi everyone! Thank you for the wonderful session today. As mentioned, I am an anthropology student from Utrecht University currently doing research on climate fiction and hopeful storytelling. If you would like to have a chat and/or share your experiences, please feel free to contact me at m.a@hotmail.com

APPENDIX 2 | Reading questionnaire

I completed this questionnaire after each story I read during fieldwork.

1. What was this short story about? Tell the story in a few sentences.
2. Who were the main characters?
3. Where was the story set?
4. When was the story set?
5. Was there a problem linked to climate change? Which one(s)? How did it impact the characters?
6. How was nature (plants, animals, landscapes…) impacted?
7. Was nature a passive or active element/character in this story?
8. Was there something the characters could do to make life better?
9. Did the characters engage in any activity to make life better?
10. Who was held responsible for the situation? What happened to them?
11. How did the characters envision the past?
12. How did the characters imagine the future?
13. How did this story make you feel?
14. Did you enjoy reading this story? Why?
15. Have you heard of this writer before you read their work?
16. Do you think this story is related to your own writings? How?
17. What ideas of the future that you have read in climate fiction would you like to see happening in the world?

Example 1 | AFTERGLOW by Lindsey Brodeck

https://grist.org/fix/imagine-2200-climate-fiction-afterglow/ Read on 28.01.22

1. What was this short story about? Can you tell me the story in a few sentences?
The story is about a woman who lives on Earth in harsh conditions. Her girlfriend has secured a trip for them to leave Earth, they will have to be working on the spaceship. However, she has doubts about leaving. She starts seeing signs around her and follows them, and ends up meeting a community whose aim is to participate in nature revival. She will have to make a choice between staying and leaving.

2. Who were the main characters?

The main character is a young woman, Talli, her girlfriend, and the non-binary person she meets in the community, Wyl.

3. Where was the story set?

It is set in a future version of the US. Example: downtown Brexton-Maine.

4. When was the story set?

It is set a few centuries in the future, in the summer.

5. Was there a problem linked to climate change? Which one(s)? How did it impact the characters?

The whole environment of the girl is gray and city-like, technology is everywhere, it is dirty and diseases spread. Talli feels sort of imprisoned, sad.

6. How was nature (plants, animals, landscapes…) impacted?

Nature seems dead at first. However, the story shows that it is stronger than expected. It can revive through various actions, leaving it be, and volunteer initiatives.

7. Was nature a passive or active element/character in this story?

Nature is active as it regains territories and power - with just a species of frogs, a whole ecosystem is created.

8. Was there something the characters could do to make life better?

By choosing to stay, Talli can choose to have an impact on her environment, but it has to be a conscious decision. The other choices are trying to forget (through drugs) or leaving.

9. Did the characters engage in any activity to make life better?

Talli decides to join a volunteer group, the Keepers. She also decides to switch her way of speaking/thinking of the world, from a doomed place to one of possibility and life, using language to respect Earth and all beings, seeing the holiness and interconnection in everything.

10. Who was held responsible for the situation? What happened to them?

Human species, no particular blame. They are left in a miserable state.

11. How did the characters envision the past?

No mention - or just to say that species went extinct. Mention of new planet discoveries and pods who land on them.

12. How did the characters imagine the future?
Fear of leaving the Earth and being enslaved on a pod. Fear of staying on a damaged and hopeless planet. Hope of staying and that there is so much possibility and potential right here (after she discovers the Keepers and their work).

13. How did this story make you feel?
Sad and anxious at the description of the world and everything that has been lost. Hopeful at the idea of nature surviving and thriving despite everything.

14. Did you enjoy reading this story? Why?
I did, but I felt uncomfortable throughout.

15. Have you heard of this writer before you read their work?
No, never.

16. Do you think this story is related to your own writings? How?
I think it has much more technology, and more hope.

17. What ideas of the future that you have read in climate fiction would you like to see happening in the world?
I like the idea of a group of committed individuals doing good for the Earth, as well as the notion of language to respect Earth. I like the use of all pronouns, the freedom of bodies.

***

Example 2 | TIDINGS by Rich Larson

https://grist.org/fix/imagine-2200-climate-fiction-tidings/ Read on 05.02.22

1. What was this short story about? Can you tell me the story in a few sentences?
The story gives snapshots of 5 places and events in the future, from 2038 to 2132.

2. Who were the main characters?
Each vignette has different characters, usually 2 characters at most. They range from all genders and age, all nationalities.

3. Where was the story set?
2038 in Maradi, Niger.
Prague, Czechia: 2044
Site of IDC-59, Australia: 2066
Cygnet Community, Dënéndeh Territory: 2099

Ko Phangan, Thailand Republic: 2132

4. When was the story set?

ibid

5. Was there a problem linked to climate change? Which one(s)? How did it impact the characters?

The whole world has suffered from the effects of climate change; global warming, climate refugees and camps…

6. How was nature (plants, animals, landscapes…) impacted?

Plastic everywhere, lack of water, animals disappearing.

Cities were overcrowded, with many diseases.

7. Was nature a passive or active element/character in this story?

Nature was a constant in the story - its revival makes the character alive again, more hopeful. Only with nature being at peace can characters be at peace.

8. Was there something the characters could do to make life better? Did they?

Yes! Engaging in various activities such as streaming the plight of refugees, inventing new technologies to destroy plastic, finding a way to communicate with animals etc… In that sense, they used technology to make life better.

10. Who was held responsible for the situation? What happened to them?

Blame of various governments when speaking of the refugee situation. No particular blame otherwise - general blame.

11. How did the characters envision the past?

Glimpses of the past to explain the present. Hope is anchored in the present. One man thinks of his past in a refugee camp as over.

12. How did the characters imagine the future?

Hope (and despair) is anchored in the present - their actions are very much rooted in the moment.

13. How did this story make you feel? Did you enjoy reading this story? Why?

I liked reading it - it goes from dark to hopeful, there are beautiful descriptions of what is possible. It made me want to act!

15. Have you heard of this writer before you read their work?

No, never.

16. Do you think this story is related to your own writings? How?
Heavier use of technology than my own writings

17. What ideas of the future that you have read in climate fiction would you like to see happening in the world?
I liked the idea of being in sync with animals, going beyond the human and truly being part of nature. I like the positive use of technology.

APPENDIX 3 | Extract of own pieces

Written during fieldwork; February, March and April 2022

As a 'new iron curtain' falls close to home and rips apart the lives of children, as innocent people are being sent to Kigali, as French politics are filling my eyes with frustrated tears, I join countless zoom calls – theatre shows, writing groups, panels and workshops, interviews, discussions and reading sessions. I fall asleep to stories of hope, the voice of a man narrating, accents and noises making the stories alive and soothing me. I write and share what I write – can you believe it? I meet inspiring people – of all ages, countries and gender. I listen to what they say and I cannot take notes quickly enough. I have a log where I write my impressions after the events. It is a funny thing. Most of the time the words escape me, written in capital letters and circled with bright colours – and do you know which words come back, always ? I'll give you some : HOPEFUL, INSPIRED, HAPPY, RELAXED, LUCKY, COMMUNITY, LOVED.
So, despite it all, I have faith. Do you ?

***

I danced in a kitchen in Germany, bra-less, the hand of a blond young man on my hip. The family had a giant pot in the garden, and in winter they filled it with

water and warmed it up, the white steam rising against black night in that large expanse of outside, night owls saying hi to us as we ran to the pot on icy soil. I held my breath as I plunged into the burning water. The skin of my feet seemed light against the hot copper, shoulders cold against the December air. My bare legs brushed his under the water, stars falling like a blindfold on my eyes. The magic of this place followed me for a few months, a spark transmitted on paper, carried to Iceland on a plane I swore I would not take, then slowly lost. Maybe I misplaced it on the beach at Bitrufjordur, buried under wet sand along with kilos of dirty plastic, sheets and pieces of rainbow rotting within the earth, our volunteer hands pulling and pulling at it with no result. Many people cried that day. I can't remember if I did. So maybe yes, maybe I lost the spark there.

I am sorry I cannot make my words clearer. They jump on the page and when they do I have to let them. I am not sure they will ever come back, you know ? I lost too much time already.

I have started making a new list. This one is a list of smells - Smells I wish my daughter could know. Warm, summer rain that you run into, your face turned to the sky. The gentle smell of fir trees in my home region, carrying our childhood whispers. Bakeries in the Balkans, warm börek in Bosnia after a sleepless night discussing the future with new friends. The first blossoms of spring, a new light inside your lungs after the darkness of winter. Smells of strangers as you brush past them without a mask.

Are these smells part of her future?

***

We lived on an island but I never heard the sea laugh.
It was more of a muffled sound, a grunt like Zaki's in the morning, when he went out and put a foot on the hot ground. It took him longer than most to start wearing shoes. I think he expected things to change, to move like the rhythm of the waves or the seasons.
There was no rhythm anymore, nothing but a continuous line of horrors and questions, like the thread on which I was performing. Just as thin, just as treacherous. You needed talent to manage the crossing.

The ground was drying out under our feet. I too was always barefoot before it became too hot to walk on without protection. My daughter Lila never knew that time - when she started walking Arni was already

worried about her skin. Surely she could have gone without shoes for a few more months, a few more years, before the burns got really serious. But by then she was already gone. I should have let her walk barefoot. At least once. But it was Arni who took care of her, of course.

We had created her. Lila. She was tiny when she was born, a piece of sun, red and round, radiating with life. She had a small nose. That's the first thing I noticed about her, a little nose in an island of wrinkles in a face reddened by the hours of work. What work? She had had nothing to do. I had had to push her out of me, eject her like a dead weight. She had come quietly and for a moment, a terrible second, I had hoped she wouldn't scream.

After she left – after they both left - I fell asleep with a piece of her clothing, pressing the light blue cloth against my face, against my nose. I breathed it in, my lips moving forward in a semblance of a kiss. My hands sought it out in the night. Over the years it became softer and lost its shape, its colour, and the nights got warmer. Too warm to press anything against my face or any part of my skin. Too warm to wear skin, really.

When they were both alive and we could still go to the beach, we would find coloured pieces in the dunes. Sometimes when we dug, we found more, as thin as paper or as hard as glass. They were everywhere, even in the fish we ate. We never knew if this was a good omen. Lila's favourite pieces were purple. She would pick them up with a cloth and stuff them into the pocket of her dress. There was a glass jar in our tent, filled with purple pieces and smeared with dirty, wet sand that left a greasy particle on the grey glass. Afterwards, the sea swallowed most of the dunes on the eastern part - along with the coloured pieces and our phantom footsteps. It did not laugh but it ate, a glorious severe, liquid mouth. Insatiable.
It is so warm here now.

***

Prompt: Activism

I often think back to that evening.
She had laid her long face next to mine. She was still a stranger then, but in a sense that did not matter because she was an *activist*. I had watched her build a fire, pretending not to know how to do it as she explained it to me, her hands as rough as the logs as she brushed my arm, just once. Afterwards she had explained what had happened at the march that day and I barely listened. I couldn't tell you what she told me, now. It's gone, like so many other things.

People still laughed at activists, then, society's loony hippies. Bearded men living in trees.

She did not live in a tree, and she did not have a beard. But people still laughed.

They would not laugh for long. They did not laugh anymore.

There is no such word as *activist* now. Past-believers, some people call them. Still loony, but not in a cute way. They still believe, and that is scary. They still have hope, and people do not want it. It hurts. I know, it hurts.

I have never been an activist. I wanted to, once, as her face was next to mine and I wanted to be everything she valued. I wanted to save her planet. But I didn't believe then, and I still don't.

I wonder if her hand would still brush mine.

***

Prompt: Compost

Black hands, leaves turned yellow.

I used to be crispy and fresh, bright green and ready to be caressed by human teeth.

But my destiny was other. They put me here. Compost me.

I used to be a piece of cabbage. I am now a whole.

Someone put their feet in us, once.

It must have been as strange for them as it was for us. Toes move, disperse, destroy. Our carefully built equilibrium was destroyed in a moment, some of us scraped by nails, their silent scream as they were displaced deafening in the damp, heavy place. Weeks and weeks of slowly going down, waiting for new arrivals to cover us. Approaching one another, connecting, suiting into chosen bits and pieces. Now we must start it all again, our juices lonely, torn apart. I am a whole which has lost its parts.

I am hoping for other feet, other hands, hoping for novel destruction to put things back as I want them to be. As the whole wants it to be. I am too old to create new links. My juices flow without directions, without support, no caring leaves and roots to tend to. I miss the coffee grains that entered my back, the thick carrot peel that oozed in me, the square onion piece and its sharp smell. All part of me, me a part of them. A whole compost.

-

The compost was her nature, rotten, stringent layers of all she loved.

Liz loved putting their feet deep, deep in it. Her dad had the biggest mushroom company in the city. There were 5 people working in the company, and Liz called them all by their names. Their hair was hidden under light green fabric and their hands smelled like mushroom – a light,

faint scent of the forest after a night of rain.

Sometimes her dad took her to the forest, to the sparse areas where a few thin trees remained. One day he gently put his fingers against one of these trees, leaving them for a second as a flicker of something passed across his freckled face. He said that mushrooms could once be found here. Some still popped up, sometimes. Now he would not dare eat them. He forbade her too.

***

Prompt: Unique character

She had soft, velvety dark skin, with lighter patches of melanin along her forearms, like freshly skimmed foam. Her fingernails were long, streaked with thin pinkish lines, fragile keratin like broken seashells.

Noone knew what her hair looked like – she kept it hidden under a waterproof hat, the long edges framing her face comically, waves of green plastic sticking to the sides of her lips whenever she moved too abruptly. She had not turned into seaweed yet, of course, she was still a woman, but it was just a matter of time.

It had all started innocently enough. She had been on her favourite beach one day and noticed a little hat floating on water. She had pulled on it, half expecting to find a small, drowned fairy underneath. But it didn't matter how hard she pulled, what was underwater had stayed there. This is how she had met seaweed – it had outbest her, and she had fallen in love. That was how she usually fell in love.

The plan came afterwards, and was easy – if she couldn't live on land, wouldn't live on land, she'd move to the water. Water would overflow everything, anyway, it was just a matter of time. So it was decided – she would not wait for death. She would become seaweed.

She had devised a strategy. Everyday she would go to the water and observe. She would learn to move like seaweed. Every evening she stood in her little wooden cabin, stuck her arms against her hips and started doing a seaweed-like motion. She pinched her lips. She took seaweed baths. She put seaweed under her pillow. She drank seaweed, dreamed seaweed. After a while she thought her skin looked a bit greener and it pleased her.

One day, sitting on a dune of sand, she realised her pee smelled like the sea. She wiggled happily.

Maybe there was nothing to worry about. She would survive.

***

Prompt: Waste

I really love my job, but when I saw them dump waste into the river, things started slowly shifting. There was a new nuance to it – to how the boss talked to his dog, to the way children played in the grass, to the look of the guard when I showed my pass in the morning.

I had heard of those accounts before, heard of those sick parents and dying pets, of radiation and the horrible smell of dead fish and garbage.

Recording in progress. The flow of water is like the flow of thoughts, obstructed by waste.

Jona told me she remembered swimming in rivers, before. Some people did. Not all of them.

***

Prompt: Trucks

The sun caught his eye for a second, a bright splash of gold reflected on the truck's solar panel. It was all around him, that light, dancing in shimmers on the hot road. He looked at the watch to his right, a blue round thing his son had built at school, years ago. He had been driving more than the 'recommended' time. He'd have to stop soon. His mind always got confused during the long summer nights of the northern parts, the bright light keeping him company at all times. It was hard to keep track of temporalities, days merging into night.

There was also not so much he had to do. The truck was automatic, and powered by the sun. Sometimes it felt like gliding on water, except for the twists and turns of the mountains, giants keeping him company. He could remember other times, days spent on the road, greasy pants and cold hands on the steering wheel. He did not have much choice, then. He had to go quick, hardly stopping for breaks. He had to deliver whatever could be found in his trucks – food supplies, car parts, clothes. He remembered when people hid in trucks trying to get to other places, safer places. He remembered the knot in his stomach, the fear of falling asleep, the rough contact of his palm against the leather of the gearshift, countless days lost to the road, to the truck. It had felt like a voracious monster then, eating away his youth.

Now things were different. They barely needed him to drive – the needs for new things were not as intense. People had learned to like what they had, and appreciate the new when it came, a balance of needs. And when those needs came, he delivered, in his shiny truck.

[79]

[79] Image from https://writingtheresistance.com/home/ Accessed on 01.07.22