



**Review Essay: Beyond Cli-Fi: A Review of
*Contemporary Fiction and Climate Uncertainty:
Narrating Unstable Futures* by Marco Caracciolo,
Transscalar Critique: Climate, Blackness, Crisis by
Henry Ivry, and *Climate Lyricism* by Min Hyoung Song**

Contemporary Fiction and Climate Uncertainty: Narrating Unstable Futures by Marco Caracciolo, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022, 219 pp., ISBN 978-1-3502-3389-8, h/bk £90.00, p/bk £28.99, e-book £0.00.

Transscalar Critique: Climate, Blackness, Crisis by Henry Ivry, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2022, 232 pp., ISBN 9781399506472, h/bk £90.00, p/bk £19.99, e-book £19.99.

Climate Lyricism by Min Hyoung Song, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2021, 256 pp., ISBN 978-1-4780-1773-8, h/bk £62.58, p/bk £16.99, e-book £16.14.

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Amitav Ghosh opens his 2016 non-fiction account of climate change, *The Great Derangement*, by describing the climate crisis as ‘a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination’ (9). For Ghosh, the realist novel participates in our ‘great derangement’ – that is, our collective tendency to conceal a volatile and changing climate – and thus perpetuates rather than resolves our inability to respond meaningfully to climate change. Marco Caracciolo’s *Contemporary Fiction and Climate Uncertainty: Narrating Unstable Futures* (2022), Henry Ivry’s *Transcalar Critique: Climate, Blackness, Crisis* (2022) and Min Hyoung Song’s *Climate Lyricism* (2021) all seek, in varying degrees, to identify a mode and genre of literature that might meet the particular ‘crisis...of the imagination’ that climate change incites. These texts turn away from what has been broadly classified as ‘climate fiction’ and, indeed, ‘realist fiction’, to locate an alternative response to the climate crisis in literature that is experimental in form and genre. For Ivry and Hyoung Song, this necessarily means a turn to racially and culturally marginalised writers because of how crisis and catastrophe have always haunted such communities. The distinct canons that Caracciolo, Ivry, and Hyoung Song identify challenge the ways of living – whether anthropocentric, individualistic, or merely in denial – that prevent us from wrestling with the uncertainty that defines our climate crisis.

Marco Caracciolo’s *Contemporary Fiction and Climate Uncertainty* argues that formal innovations in contemporary literature challenge readers to become comfortable with uncertainty. For Caracciolo, the cultural crisis of climate change hinges upon both epistemological and ontological ambiguity; namely, facing climate change requires us to accept the breakdown of human mastery. Caracciolo suggests that ‘narrative can help us come to grips with an unknowable future’ through various formal innovations (4). Caracciolo traces these formal innovations to postmodernist literature but argues that contemporary literature, unlike postmodernism, applies such techniques to contemporary issues – such as climate change. Caracciolo’s argument largely hinges upon interpretation and the ‘affective impact’ a literary work may have upon its reader (18). As a result, Caracciolo centres formal techniques in contemporary fiction that unsettle the reader’s sense of time, place, linearity and character.

In his first chapter, ‘Uncertainty in the Future Tense’, Caracciolo begins with the future-tense narration of Jennifer Egan’s ‘Black Box’ and Ali Smith’s *How to Be Both*, texts that, according to Caracciolo, question the possibility of a predictable future. Reading Egan and Smith alongside the parallel storyworlds in Jesse Kellerman’s *Controller* and Jeff VanderMeer’s *Dead Astronauts*, Caracciolo suggests that such formal innovations generate ‘uncertainty by disrupting the expectation of closure that comes with narrative (and with endings more specifically)’ (27). In Chapter 2, ‘Pathways to Unstable Worlds’, Caracciolo shifts from time to space, focusing on texts whose

storyworlds ‘put extreme pressure on the presumed stability of the world’, thereby forcing readers to recognise spaces and worlds as multiple and always entangled. Next, in Chapter 3, Caracciolo looks to works that centre animals without anthropomorphising them, arguing that Alexis Wright’s *The Swan Book* and Jeff VanderMeer’s *The Strange Bird* insist upon the ‘unknowability of animal minds’ (103) and thereby parallel ‘the precarity of humanity’s involvement in nonhuman processes’ (102). Continuing to explore the effect of narratorial perspective, Chapter 4 argues that metafictional strategies deployed in various works of contemporary literature ‘generate forms of ethical and epistemological uncertainty that resonate strongly with the ecological crisis’ (109). To illustrate this claim, Caracciolo examines the stylistic pastiche and non-linear plotting of David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* alongside the three paralleled narratives in J.M. Coetzee’s *Diary of a Bad Year*, arguing that both texts reject causality and thereby destabilise Western epistemological certainty.

Finally, Caracciolo concludes by considering how technological and computational literary interventions challenge the text as a static narrative. In Chapter 5, ‘Deus Ex Algorithmo’, Caracciolo suggests that David Mitchell’s *Ghostwritten* and Richard Powers’ *The Overstory* formally model algorithmic networking to enact the failure of computational solutions to the climate crisis, a formal choice that simultaneously propels and upends the narrative. Instead, ‘Ecologies of Interactive Narrative’ proposes interactive video games such as *Outer Wilds*, *The Walking Dead*, *Kentucky Route Zero* and *Heaven’s Vault* as impactful modes of storytelling that stage multiple possible narratives via the player’s interactions. Caracciolo posits that the narrative form of the video game is highly ambiguous, given that ‘players are immersed in a setting and narrative whose many ambiguities do not only preexist but flow from choices they make’ (178). Much like Caracciolo’s other interventions, here he emphasises the precarity that interactive storytelling produces for the user, re-enacting the epistemological and ontological uncertainty produced by the climate crisis.

In *Contemporary Fiction and Climate Uncertainty*, Caracciolo ultimately concludes that contemporary literary forms that destabilise time, space, and narrative certainty radically unwrite human mastery and thus reflect the breakdown of Western mastery that the climate crisis enacts. Covering a range of fiction and various formal techniques, *Contemporary Fiction and Climate Uncertainty* remains limited by its strict emphasis upon contemporary literary forms. In other words, Caracciolo overlooks the many literary modes that, while predating contemporary literature, nonetheless invoke a similar feeling of uncertainty in the reader and might operate as models for the contemporary texts he cites. Similarly, Caracciolo’s project would have been improved by engaging with a more diverse canon of texts that similarly revoke Western mastery and anthropocentric ontologies.

Indeed, where Caracciolo argues that the formalistic innovations he identifies are unique to contemporary literature, Henry Ivry's *Transscalar Critique: Climate, Blackness, Crisis* argues that Black studies and Black literature has always sought to re-write the terms of 'the human', long predating a similar turn in contemporary literature and critique. Much like Caracciolo, Ivry argues that the climate crisis demands new literary and critical responses given that, according to Ivry, realism 'is no longer a tenable mode of representing the economic, material, ecological, and affective realities of the present' (9). Rather than reading contemporary literature writ large, Ivry looks to literary forms that address multiple scales simultaneously, shifting 'from the human to the nonhuman, from the marginal to the massive, from the big to the small' (2). Ivry argues that this 'transscalar' approach has an alternate lineage in Black studies; he suggests that anti-Blackness, much like climate change, operates across a multiplicity of scales and thus Black authors have long innovated new forms and genres to represent the experiences of anti-Blackness. At the same time, Ivry contends that the Anthropocene cannot be represented in literature without recognising that 'climate, Blackness, crisis' are 'simultaneously operative and inextricable from one another at all times' (8).

In Chapter 1, 'Crisis Realism: Writing Economically, Thinking Ecologically', Ivry identifies 'crisis realism' as a mode of realist fiction that represents and seeks to resolve collective crisis by way of the individual. Looking specifically at literature concerned with the 2008 financial crisis, Ivry contends that Dave Eggers' *A Hologram for the King*, Martha McPhee's *Dear Money*, and Michael Lewis' *The Big Short* scale down the global financial crisis to individual narrative and thus render a single character culpable. Where this model of literature does not work for the scale of the climate crisis, Ivry suggests that Joshua Ferris's *The Unnamed* implements instead a 'transscalar approach' that, using his character's unnamed disease to resist both causality and closure, provides an alternative literary model. Similarly, in contrast to the works of 'crisis realism' that Ivry finds insufficient for our current crisis, Ivry describes Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior*, Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*, and Nell Zink's *Wallcreeper* as a weirding of literary realism. In 'Global Weirding: Climate Crisis and the Anthropocene Imaginary', Ivry suggests that, just as the scale of the human has become 'weirder' in the climate crisis – both geological and individual in scale – these texts 'weird' the domestic and the language they employ. What Ivry terms 'weirding' describes moments when the narrative is disrupted by the Anthropocene and climate change which, by invading the domestic plot, 'defamiliarise' the world (103).

Ivry continues with his critique of 'crisis realism' in Chapter 3, 'Transscalar Blackness: Race and the Long Anthropocene', by suggesting that we need to rewrite the very definition of crisis from a disruptive, immediate event into 'a constitutive state of being' (112). Ivry draws upon environmental and Black scholars, such as Sylvia Wynter

and Elizabeth DeLoughrey, who point us to the violences of the Anthropocene as an ongoing aspect of settler colonialism and anti-Blackness rather than as a temporal rupture. In contrast to Caracciolo's emphasis upon contemporary literature, Ivry cites a longer critical and literary history of Black studies that predates his 'transscalar critical discourse' and from which Ivry draws transscalar approaches (116). In Chapter 4, 'Improbable Metaphor: Jesmyn Ward and the Asymmetries of the Anthropocene', Ivry reads Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*, *Where the Line Bleeds*, *Sing, Unburied*, *Sing*, and her memoir *Men We Reaped*, arguing that Ward weirds her realism to highlight how a history of anti-Blackness is inextricable from environmental violence. Ivry looks to how Ward includes the supernatural, and entangles human and nonhuman so that, 'every character, nearly every sentence, is inflected by a cohabitation with nonhuman scales' (166).

Finally, Ivry suggests that Paul Beatty's use of satire in his novels *The White Boy Shuffle*, *Tuff*, *Slumberland*, and *The Sellout* formulate yet another transscalar form. In 'Unmitigated Blackness: Paul Beatty's Transscalar Satire', Ivry argues that Paul Beatty's novels attend both to the micro-scale of lived Blackness as well as 'the macro-scale of the planet' (177). According to Ivry, Beatty's satire allows him to move between scales without making equivalencies, prioritising both the geological and the biological, alongside the economic and the national. Ultimately, this ability to move between scales without substituting or privileging any single approach is precisely what Ivry identifies as the 'transscalar', in both literary form and critique. By 'weirding' their realism, and stretching and expanding narrative form and language without moving into sci-fi or magical realism, Jesmyn Ward and Paul Beatty successfully represent the 'asymmetries' of the Anthropocene, without substituting or reducing either anti-Blackness or climate violence.

In their respective works, Caracciolo and Ivry both critique climate fiction for an emphasis upon human agency and the individual, but, in *Climate Lyricism*, Min Hyung Song critiques climate fiction for its expression of human powerlessness. Hyung Song centres his work upon 'the revived lyric', which he describes as a contemporary iteration of the lyric largely taken up by marginalised poets that ultimately challenges the 'human' as an individualistic and Western category. In doing so, Hyung Song suggests that the revived lyric proposes collective rather than individual human agency and thus makes room for cautious optimism in the face of the climate crisis. Unlike Caracciolo and Ivry, Hyung Song's own narrative is intimate and personal, reenacting the effect of the revived lyric in his work of criticism. At the same time, Hyung Song experiments with his own form; for example, where, in Chapters 7 and 8, he uses atmospheric CO₂ – or ppm – to date texts, such that the elevating CO₂ readings textually plot our atmospheric crisis alongside literary analysis. As Hyung Song explores how various

lyric poets attune the reader to new ways of inhabiting the world, his expressive and formal experimentation participates in his own critical argument, imagining not only a new literary but new critical response to our rapidly changing planet.

Much like Ghosh's critique of our 'great derangement', Hyoung Song suggests that 'everyday denial' functionally blinds us to the reality of climate change while the revived lyric instead forces us to confront and experience discomfort (28). In his first chapter, 'What is denial?' Hyoung Song suggests that Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, Teju Cole's *Open City*, and Sally Wen Mao's poem 'Occidentalism' illustrate how individuals and communities maintain such states of denial, while Chapters 2 and 3 posit the revived lyric as a counter-measure. Citing Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*, Craig Santos Perez's 'Love in a Time of Climate Change,' Ilya Kaminsky's *Deaf Republic* and Tommy Pico's *IRL*, Hyoung Song suggests that the revived lyric can enact a state of continual and unabating discomfort which, much like climate change, must be endured. In Chapter 4, 'How Should I Live? Inattention and Everyday-Life Projects', Hyoung Song adopts second-person address to challenge the reader's own assumptions about the 'everyday'. Hyoung Song proposes that we practise 'everyday-life projects', meaning that, as we attune ourselves to the discomfort of the climate crisis, we also enact every possible change to counteract climate change. For Hyoung Song, the revived lyric can help propel 'everyday-life projects' by forcing the reader to pay attention to the everyday as a site of transformation.

In Chapter 5, Hyoung Song turns to an explicit critique of climate fiction. Reading Richard Powers' *The Overstory* alongside other texts, Hyoung Song suggests that plot and linear narrative emphasise human mastery and resolution, while climate change undoes any such claims. He resists Caracciolo's positive reading of *The Overstory* by critiquing the novel's conclusion as an attempt to resolve the storyline while simultaneously emphasising human powerlessness. In Chapter 6, 'Where Are We Now? Scalar Variance, Persistence, Swing, and David Bowie', Hyoung Song argues that both song and the lyric can, by way of 'daring contemporary experimentation', represent the 'scalar variance' that climate change produces (122). Much like Ivry, Hyoung Song identifies scale as a central epistemological problem of the climate crisis; in effect, climate change asks us to consider the geologic alongside the immediate, the hyper-local alongside the global. Where Ivry turns to 'weird' realism as a form that effectively captures such variance, Hyoung Song instead proposes the lyric. Drawing upon David Bowie, Ed Roberson, Aimee Nezhukumatathil, M. NourbeSe Philip, Layli Long Soldier, and Li-Young Lee, Hyoung Song argues that the lyric positions the present alongside the deep past or deep future within a single line, formally capturing this scalar variance.

Chapters 7 and 8 experiment with the Keeling Curve – an atmospheric record of carbon dioxide saturation – by plotting mid-century and contemporary poetry against an accelerating rather than constant temporality that reflects our rapidly changing

planet. By foregrounding the Keeling Curve, Hyoung Song suggests that the curve's increasing tempo alters the way we relate to both past and present, performing its own kind of 'everyday-life project'. In 'Part 1', Hyoung Song applies Sianne Ngai's idea of the 'zany' to his reading of mid-century poets, positing that both O'Hara and Mayer arrest the reader's attention amidst the breathlessness – or 'zaniness' – of late capitalism. In 'Part 2', Hyoung Song moves to a selection of contemporary poets whose attunement to the everyday presents a harsher and more 'dystopic' world than O'Hara and Mayer (162). For Hyoung Song, the lyric of Ada Limón, Tommy Pico and Solmaz Sharif reflect the rising tempo of the Keeling Curve and its exponential experience of entrapment. Hyoung Song concludes by reading a series of 'global' novels that imagine and represent the afterlife. Here, Hyoung Song draws upon Achille Mbembe's theory of 'necropolitics' as the political governance of death, and argues that both necropolitics and Western approaches to the climate crisis use human powerlessness as a way to elude culpability. Instead, Hyoung Song suggests that the emphasis in Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo*, Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*, and Han Kang's *Human Acts* on the afterlife points to how life continues and is made possible by death. As a result, such texts refute the climate crisis as a space of powerlessness by proposing ways to live in and beyond death.

Together, Caracciolo, Ivry, and Hyoung Song identify the inevitable failure of so-called 'climate fiction' and the realist genre to represent and imagine life inside our ongoing climate crisis. These three scholars turn their focus away from literature with an explicit focus on the environment and towards experimental forms and genres whose plasticity enable writers to account for our radically changing conditions. Realism, they contend, relies upon the individual, linearity, and resolution, all concepts that no longer fit the magnitude of the Anthropocene that demands us to act collectively, to recognize our status as a species, and to encounter a radical instability in time and space. Specifically, both Ivry and Hyoung Song point to realist fiction's focus upon the individual as a product of the same conditions that produced the Anthropocene: global capitalism and neoliberal governance. As a result, both Ivry and Hyoung Song look instead to marginalised writers whose form and content seek to dismantle Western conceptions of the 'human'. Because Black, Indigenous, and postcolonial writers have long contended with lived and ancestral experiences of rupture, ongoing violence, and uncertainty, Ivry and Hyoung Song point to forms and genres writers have innovated to wrestle with these experiences as potential models for a new type of climate literature. In particular, Hyoung Song's intimate and experimental critique enacts his own analysis of the revived lyric as a call to collective agency; by adopting the second person, weaving affective responses into literary analysis, and seeking commitments from the reader, Hyoung Song innovates a criticism that demands as much as it describes. Indeed, as the Keeling Curve rises ever higher, shorelines recede and marginalised communities suffer toxic air and soil, is there a place for criticism that does anything else?

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Reference

Ghosh, Amitav. 2016. *The Great Derangement*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

