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MATERNAL ECOLOGIES VS. THE LOGIC OF DOMINATION: REIMAGINING AGENCY AND SURVIVANCE IN 21ST-CENTURY ECOFEMINIST NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

The twenty-first century represents a critical juncture in the evolution of environmental literature, as the speculative anxieties of previous generations have transitioned into a cumulative, global reality. This report provides an exhaustive analysis of the “ecofeminist reimagining” of climate catastrophes within contemporary fiction, investigating how literary narratives serve as a transformative space for challenging the patriarchal, capitalist, and colonial underpinnings of the Anthropocene. By examining a diverse corpus of 21st-century texts—including Diane Cook’s *The New Wilderness*, Imbolo Mbue’s *How Beautiful We Were*, Suyi Davies Okungbowa’s *Lost Ark Dreaming*, and Alexis Wright’s *The Swan Book*—this research identifies a shift from traditional anthropocentric survivalism toward a paradigm of intersectional care ethics, relational accountability, and trans corporeality. The analysis explores the theoretical transition from essentialist 20th-century ecofeminism to the 21st-century concept of the “(m) Anthropocene,” a term highlighting the white, male-dominant, and extractivist drivers of planetary degradation. Furthermore, this study elucidates how formal narrative innovations—such as “we-narratives,” “petro-magic-realism,” and “interspecies focalization”—function as tools for collective climate witnessing and the subversion of the “logic of domination”. Ultimately, the report argues that contemporary climate fiction (cli-fi) reimagines catastrophe not merely as a terminal disaster but as a *krisis*—a temporal continuum of decision-making that demands a radical restructuring of human and more-than-human relations.

THE GENDERED HORIZON OF THE ANTHROPOCENE: AN INTRODUCTION

The literary landscape of the 21st century is increasingly defined by the “Anthropocene,” a geological epoch marking the overwhelming influence of human activity on Earth’s ecosystems. However, within the framework of ecofeminism, this term is increasingly critiqued as an over-generalization that masks the specific socio-political power relations responsible for ecological collapse. Contemporary scholars and novelists have proposed the alternative term “(m) Anthropocene” to emphasize that current planetary degradation is driven by a demographic of rich, extractivist, Global North, and male-dominant systems. This

critique identifies climate change not as a gender-neutral scientific problem, but as an intersectionally gendered crisis where the exploitation of nature is inextricably linked to the historical subjugation of women and marginalized communities under “settler/colonial neoliberal capitalism”.

As environmental degradation, species extinction, and biodiversity loss threaten the delicate balance of the biosphere, literature has emerged as a crucial site for “re-mything” the human relationship with the natural world. While 20th-century ecofeminism was often criticized for its essentialist tendencies—associating women with nature in a way that sometimes reinforced traditional gender roles—21st-

century ecofeminist fiction adopts an intersectional lens. This new paradigm recognizes that the “logic of domination” used to justify the mastery of nature is the same discourse used to control feminized bodies, racialized subjects, and the poor.

In 21st-century fiction, the “apocalypse” is reimagined. It is no longer merely a spectacular, cinematic event but a “slow violence”—a gradual, often invisible harm that unfolds over generations. Novels like *How Beautiful We Were* and *The New Wilderness* exemplify this shift by focusing on the “texture of lived experience” rather than grand-scale polemics. By centering the voices of those most affected by climate change—specifically women and children in the Global South or marginalized communities in the Global North—contemporary cli-fi acts as a “critical corrective” to mainstream political strategies that prioritize “gender-neutral” technology and corporate truth.

Theoretical Paradigms: From Binary Oppression to Intersectional Entanglement

The transition in ecofeminist thought from the late 20th to the early 21st century is marked by a move toward “One Health” philosophies and “post humanist” relationality. These theoretical frameworks emphasize that human health and environmental stability do not exist in isolation but are elements of a larger, multifaceted matrix. This shift is literalized in contemporary literature through the exploration of “transcorporeality”—the recognition that the environment is enacted through our very flesh.

The 21st-century paradigm rejects the “dualist, corporate positions of self-interested detachment” in favor of a “multi-relational, multispecies, decolonial, feminist care economy”. This is particularly evident in the conceptualization of “petro-masculinity,” which links the preservation of fossil fuel systems to the performance of reactionary masculine identities. This identity often manifests in literature as environmental denial or a violent attachment to carbon-intensive industries, which characters must confront as they navigate a changing world.

Furthermore, the concept of “krisis” (from the Greek etymology meaning “decision”) transforms the narrative of climate catastrophe from an unavoidable

doom into a critique of decision-making failure. Literature thus becomes a space for ethical “decision-making,” where the lack of effective and ethical response to environmental emergency is laid bare through the struggles of fictional personae.

Liquid Dystopias: Sea-Level Rise and the Hydrofeminist Body

One of the most prominent environmental threats reimagined in 21st-century fiction is the rising ocean, which serves as a potent metaphor for the “hydrofeminist” entanglement of human and non-human bodies. Novels exploring sea-level rise often move away from the “Snowpiercer” model of rigid class survival toward narratives that explore the “Watery We”—a concept that fosters solidarity and mothering practices against paternalistic logic.

The Verticality of Injustice in *Lost Ark Dreaming*

Suyi Davies Okungbowa’s *Lost Ark Dreaming* (2024) presents a near-future Nigeria where Lagos has been destroyed by the “Second Deluge”. The survivors live in five partially submerged towers called “The Fingers,” where social status is literalized by height: the affluent live at the “Pinnacle” while the “lowers” are crammed below sea level in dark, fetid conditions. Through the characters of Yekini (an analyst), Tuoyo (an undersea mechanic), and Ngozi (a bureaucrat), the novella explores how the “brutally engineered class divisions” of the past persist in the face of climate catastrophe.

Okungbowa reimagines this disaster by weaving in West African mythology, specifically the “Children of Yemoja”. These are beings who were left for dead in the Atlantic rise, only to be reawakened by an ancient power known as the “Quickening”. This mythic thread prevents the story from being just another class-based dystopia; it positions the ecological catastrophe as a spiritual and evolutionary process. The novella suggests that survival requires not just technological repair, but a collective recognition of the “spirits” and memories of those marginalized by the current system.

Florida’s Disappearance in *The Light Pirate* and *The Displacements*

Lily Brooks-Dalton’s *The Light Pirate* (2022) follows the character Wanda, born during a Category 6

hurricane, as she navigates the gradual infrastructure collapse of Florida. The novel is structured into four thematic parts that track Wanda's evolution alongside the state's dissolution into the sea. Wanda represents a "new ecological subjectivity," one that is born from the storm and eventually learns to coexist with a world where "nature will no longer stand by and accept its destruction".

This narrative of gradual loss contrasts with Bruce Holsinger's *The Displacements*, where a wealthy Miami family is suddenly stripped of their resources and forced into a FEMA shelter. Both novels use the "spectacle" of the hurricane to expose pre-existing social vulnerabilities, but *The Light Pirate* specifically adopts an ecofeminist lens by portraying Wanda's relationship with the changing landscape as one of "meaningful relationality" rather than a struggle for mastery.

Water as Memory and Ghost in Troubled Waters and Awake in the Floating City

Other contemporary works focus on the "spectral" quality of water. In Mary Annaïse Heglar's *Troubled Waters*, the death of a brother on an oil boat leads the protagonist to confront the "family ghosts" of the Mississippi River, linking the oil industry's violence with intergenerational trauma. In Susanna Kwan's *Awake in the Floating City*, water is a medium for documenting a disappearing world, where art becomes a tool for reclaiming purpose in a flooded landscape. These narratives demonstrate that hydrofeminism is not just about the physical presence of water, but about the "watery we" that carries the memories of those oppressed by "settler/colonial neoliberal capitalism".

The Forest and the Seed: Terrestrial Ethics, Extinction, and Maternal Ecology

While the ocean represents the flow and entanglement of climate crisis, terrestrial catastrophes—wildfires, droughts, and deforestation—often focus on the "seed" of resilience and the ethics of "caregiving". In these 21st-century reimagining's, the forest is not a "wilderness" to be conquered, but a "more-than-human" agent that challenges traditional literary conventions.

Rewilding the Maternal in The New Wilderness

Diane Cook's *The New Wilderness* (2020) serves as a focal point for ecofeminist analysis of terrestrial collapse. The novel follows Bea and her daughter Agnes as they join a "radical experiment in rewilding" in a government-controlled "Wilderness State". Bea's decision to leave the polluted "City" is driven by a maternal need to save her daughter, yet the wilderness proves to be a space of both liberation and surveillance.

Through an ecofeminist lens, the novel criticizes institutionalized environmentalism that mimics the "logic of domination". The "Wilderness State" is not a return to nature but a "constructed and politicized space" shaped by government power. Bea is portrayed as a figure of "complex resistance," neither a passive victim nor a traditional hero, whose embodied knowledge is crucial for survival. Agnes, conversely, embodies the "non-anthropocentric" ideal, becoming so attuned to the elements that she represents a new form of human-nature coexistence.

Extinction and Grief in the Works of Charlotte McConaghy

Charlotte McConaghy's novels—*Migrations*, *Once There Were Wolves*, and *Wild Dark Shore*—explore the "ache" of loving a natural world that is disappearing. In *Migrations*, the protagonist Franny Stone chases what might be the last migration of Arctic terns in a world where most animals are extinct. McConaghy writes "grief like it's a second language," framing climate change as a "climate-shaped loss" that requires "emotional resilience" rather than just a scientific fix.

In *Once There Were Wolves*, a biologist reintroduces wolves to the Scottish Highlands to restore the ecosystem, only to find that "humans are the real wolves". This narrative explicitly addresses "trauma healing" and the "seeds of resistance," showing how women who "plant seeds and solve crimes" challenge the patriarchal violence inherent in environmental degradation.

Drought and Reproductive Success in Flight Behavior

Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* (2012) uses the displacement of monarch butterflies to explore

climate change through a “gendered response to nonhumans”. The protagonist, Dellarobia, discovers the monarchs in Tennessee after they fail to migrate to Mexico due to ecological disruption. The novel contrasts the “exploitative land use” of the men in her family—who wish to log the mountain despite the butterflies—with Dellarobia’s growing scientific awareness.

The “weak newborn lamb” and the “distracted monarchs” in the novel symbolize the “uncertain yet grim future” of reproductive success in the Anthropocene. Kingsolver uses these “human-nonhuman parallels” to criticize the impact of climate change on all forms of life, positioning the “maternal ecology” of Dellarobia as a site of potential resistance against her patriarchal husband’s family and their stubborn “climate change denial”.

Extractive Geographies: Postcolonial Ecofeminism and Petro-Violence

In the 21st century, the environmental crisis in the Global South is inextricably linked to “histories of colonial plunder and extractive capitalism”. Postcolonial ecofeminism focuses on how “neocolonial oil exploitation” and “resource depletion” disproportionately impact marginalized communities. These narratives often use “collective witnessing” to combat the “environmental forgetting” practiced by multinational corporations and corrupt governments.

Petro-Violence and Slow Violence in *How Beautiful We Were*

Imbolo Mbue’s *How Beautiful We Were* (2021) tells the story of Kosawa, a fictional African village suffering from the toxic activities of the “Pexton” oil corporation. The novel vividly describes the “slow violence” of oil extraction: children dying from poisoned water, failing crops, and air that is “toxic”. Mbue criticizes the “extractive logic of corporate capitalism,” where empty promises of cleanup and compensation reflect the “temporal disjunction” of environmental harm—prioritizing short-term profit while the community bears long-term consequences.

The novel’s use of a “we-narrative” (a collective voice of the villagers) and “petro-magic-realism” allows for a “collective climate witnessing”. This approach

resists the dominant discourse of the Anthropocene by “refusing to universalize the threats,” instead embedding them in the specific “texture of lived experience” and the histories of “colonial violence”. The protagonist Thula emerges as a voice of resistance, carrying her father’s charge to “never forget” what it felt like to be small and in need of protection.

Petro-masculinity and Resistance in *Creation Lake*

Rachel Kushner’s *Creation Lake* (2024) explores the “logic of domination” that connects the “oppression of women with the abuse of nature”. Set against the backdrop of environmental activism and extractive capitalism, the novel follows Sadie, a protagonist who illustrates how “contemporary power systems use surveillance and technological rationality” to regulate both the environment and “feminized bodies”.

Through an ecofeminist lens, the novel disrupts the “man/woman, culture/nature, reason/emotion” binaries. It criticizes the “anthropocentric ideologies” that view nature as a passive object for human use, advocating instead for a “care ethics” and “relational accountability” to the “more-than-human world”. The analysis of the novel suggests that environmental degradation cannot be separated from gendered oppression, as the same “instrumental reasoning” is used to commodify both women’s bodies and the natural world.

Surveillance and the (m)Anthropocene: Petro-masculinity in *High-Rise* and *High-Tech Dystopias*

A distinct trend in 21st-century ecofeminist fiction is the critique of “techno-fixes” and the “militant/industrial masculinities” that seek to manage the climate crisis through control rather than care. These narratives often take place in “hyper-stratified” environments where surveillance is the primary tool for maintaining order in a collapsing world.

The Architecture of the (m)Anthropocene

In *Lost Ark Dreaming*, the “Fingers” towers are described as a “playground for the wealthy” that has been repurposed as a refuge. The “Pinnacle” represents the height of “petro-masculine” control, where “egotistical bureaucrats” like Ngozi maintain status through rigid economic stratification. The novella frames this class-based society as a “ravage of centuries of capitalism built upon slavery,”

literalized in the high-rise buildings. The message is “unflinching,” fighting against the “despair sparked by rampant greed” and rallying the characters to “rise to the challenges” through community rather than height.

Similarly, in *The Great Transition* by Nick Fuller Googins, the story takes place sixteen years after the world has been saved from the peak climate crisis. However, the transition is marred by the “assassination of climate criminals” and a “dystopian near-future” where the trauma of the past still dictates social relations. The novel uses alternating first-person chapters to explore how a “family project” of oral history becomes a means of processing the “peak years of the climate crisis” and the “logic of domination” that nearly destroyed the planet.

The AI and the Animal in Hum and Terrestrial History

Helen Phillips’ *Hum* introduces a near-future world where climate change and “intelligent robots called hums” have transformed the labor market. When the protagonist May takes her family to the “Botanical Garden,” a rare green refuge, she is forced to “trust a hum” to save her children from a threat. This narrative reimagines the “human/non-human binary” by suggesting that in a “warming world,” the boundaries between biological and artificial intelligence are as porous as the boundary between “culture and nature”.

In Joe Mungo Reed’s *Terrestrial History*, a visitor from a “human settlement on Mars” travels backward through time to seek help from a fusion scientist, Hannah, in Scotland. The novel disrupts “scalar boundaries” by contrasting the “short-term human scale” with the “long-term planetary scale”. This “boundary crossing” serves as a critique of “anthropocentrism,” suggesting that the “interventions” of the future are often limited by the “decision-making failures” of the present.

Formal Transformations: We-Narratives and Petro-Magic-Realism

21st-century ecofeminist fiction is characterized not only by its themes but also by its formal “experimental narrative forms”. Authors use “non-linear time, interspecies focalization, and polyphonic narration” to challenge “anthropocentric assumptions” and the

“progress-based” logic of patriarchal history.

The Power of the Collective Voice

As previously analyzed, the “we-narrative” in *How Beautiful We Were* is a radical formal choice. By using a collective narrator, Mbue “particularizes the bodies” that bear the cost of ecological disaster. This technique is identified as a vital tool to “combat environmental forgetting,” as it refuses to allow a single “hero” to represent the struggle of an entire community.

Petro-Magic-Realism and Mythic Interludes

“Petro-magic-realism” is another innovative mode, blending the surreal with the material reality of oil extraction. This is seen in both Mbue’s work and Okungbowa’s *Lost Ark Dreaming*, where “mythic, poetic extracts” illuminate the plot and position the “Children of Yemoja” as an evolutionary or spiritual being/process. These “glancing references” and “interludes” establish the world as one where “weather and cloud imaginaries” shape climate consciousness.

Indigenous Ecofeminism: Sovereignty of Land and Mind

Novelists from Indigenous cultures have adopted and extended ecofeminist theory to portray an “intimate relationship with the environment” shaped by an intersectional understanding of race, gender, and class. Indigenous ecofeminism focuses on “survivance” (survival + resistance) and the rejection of “Euro-American stereotypical images” of nature.

Anticolonial Resurgence in The Swan Book and Locust Girl

Alexis Wright’s *The Swan Book* reimagines the climate catastrophe through the “relational dynamics” between humans, waters, and ancestors. Set in an Australian context, it criticizes the “colonial and patriarchal forces” that exploit both the land and people, connecting the “displacement of marginalized communities” to the fate of the natural world. Merlinda Bobis’s *Locust Girl* similarly frames climate change as a “pathology of an ethically numb human condition,” positioning women as “agents of renewal and resistance” against oppressive leaders.

Matrilineage and Survivance in Solar Storms

Linda Hogan’s *Solar Storms* (1995/ongoing impact

in 21st-century studies) is a “novel of environmental protest” that analyzes the ability of “inter-female bonding” to mend the protagonist’s broken universe. The novel nostalgically reconstitutes “pre-colonial indigenous culture,” where women were “bearers of children and weavers of communal ties”. It highlights that “Indigenous thinkers need to be at the table” with feminists and queer theorists because they share similar “critiques of power” and the “logic of domination”.

Key Concepts in Indigenous Ecofeminist Fiction

- **Biocentric Worldview:** Rejection of “Western anthropocentrism” in favor of the intrinsic value of all forms of life (animals, plants, etc.).
- **Reciprocity and Stewardship:** Narratives that move away from “extractivist machinery” toward principles of “kinship and sustainability”.
- **Decolonial Ethics:** Refusal of “settler-colonial tropes” and “apocalyptic framing” in favor of land-based relationality and hope.
- **Spiritual Ecology:** Interweaving “ecological critique” with “ghost dances” and ancestral focused resistance.

Educational and Pedagogical Potentials: Cli-Fi as Ethical Rehearsal

Beyond its literary value, 21st-century ecofeminist fiction offers powerful tools for “climate change education”. By integrating these narratives into curricula, educators can encourage students to “critically examine the relationship between humans, climate, and the environment” through a pedagogy of “radical hope”.

Cli-Fi as Pedagogical Method

Academics argue that “statistics and policy reports alone cannot achieve” the embodied understanding of environmental crisis that literature provides. For instance, using “papercasts” or “perzines” to read climate patterns within texts like Tim Winton’s *Juice* reveals “fresh patterns and insights” into atmospheric speculation. Cli-fi “humanizes scientists and public servants,” making “science more widely accessible” and motivating “behavior change”.

Emerging Trends (2024–2025)

The most recent scholarship and literary awards indicate a move toward “climate optimism” and

“climate accuracy”. The 2025 Imagine 2200 collection, for example, celebrates stories where “climate solutions flourish” and humans “all thrive” through the “transformative power of radical imagining”. This shift is mirrored by awards like the 2025 Climate Fiction Prize, which highlights “intergenerational solidarity” and “female resilience” in works like *And So I Roar*. Furthermore, tools like the Climate Reality Check are increasingly used to ensure “climate accuracy” and “raise awareness” in media representations. Finally, “Fourth Wave Ecofeminism” continues to emerge, embracing “digital activism and intersectionality” to critique humanity’s “exploitative relationship with nature”.

TOWARD A RELATIONAL CRISIS: A CONCLUSION

The ecofeminist reimagining of climate catastrophe in 21st-century fiction serves as a profound rejection of the “logic of domination” and the “m(Anthropocene)” frameworks that have led to the current planetary emergency. By deconstructing the “man/woman, culture/nature” binaries and replacing them with a “multi-relational, multispecies care economy,” these narratives offer a path forward rooted in “relational accountability” and “justice-centered approaches”.

Contemporary fiction reimagines the “crisis” not as an endpoint, but as a “krisis”—a continuous moment of “decision-making” where the “texture of lived experience” and the “voices of the marginalized” must be prioritized. Whether through the “hydrofeminist watery we” of *The Light Pirate*, the “petro-magic-realism” of *How Beautiful We Were*, or the “mythic Quickening” of *Lost Ark Dreaming*, 21st-century literature acts as a “site of ethical reflection, critique, and hope”.

Ultimately, this corpus of literature suggests that ethical transformation requires not only “scientific and policy interventions” but a “cultural shift” in how humans perceive and relate to the “more-than-human world”. By providing “alternative visions” that center “climate justice” and “maternal ecology,” 21st-century ecofeminist fiction ensures that even in a “climate-ravaged world,” the possibility of “positive transformation” and “sustainable futures” remains a radical reality. The “roar” of women and girls in the face of drought, the “sentient waters” of the

great lakes, and the “ghosts of extractive capitalism” all converge in a literature that demands we “never forget” our interdependence with the Earth.

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