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SHORT FORMS FOR ECO-ANXIETY: COGNITIVE REALISM IN CLIMATE FICTION

FORMAS BREVES PARA LA ECOANSIEDAD: REALISMO COGNITIVO EN LA FICCIÓN CLIMÁTICA

FORMES ABREGEES POUR L'ECO-ANXIETE : LE REALISME COGNITIF DANS LA FICTION CLIMATIQUE

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Abstract: Researchers across a wide range of fields are devoting increasing attention to the psychological impact of climate change. This article focuses on literary fiction that foregrounds these psychological ramifications; fiction, in other words, that portrays characters experiencing what has been variously called "eco-" or "climate anxiety". I argue that the short story form and brevity on a stylistic level can pursue cognitive realism by evoking the sense of fragmented attention and futurelessness that defines the psychology of anxiety. In many instances, that representation of climate anxiety is supported and amplified by literature's engagement with news and social media that are associated with a breakdown of attentional focus. To explore those links, I draw on work on the phenomenology of anxiety and discuss examples from contemporary US literature, and more specifically from Lauren Groff's short stories and Jenny Offill's novel *Weather*. I show how these works capture the connection between awareness of climate change and the protagonists' unique mind

style, and how cognitive realism is often accompanied by dialogue with the forms of digital communication.

Keywords: Uncertainty; Econarratology; Brevity; Form; Contemporary US fiction.

Resumen: Investigadores de una amplia gama de campos están prestando cada vez más atención al impacto psicológico del cambio climático. Este artículo se centra en la ficción literaria que pone en primer plano estas ramificaciones psicológicas; en otras palabras, ficción que retrata personajes que experimentan lo que se ha llamado "eco-" o "ansiedad climática". Sostengo que la forma y la brevedad del cuento a nivel estilístico pueden perseguir el realismo cognitivo al evocar la sensación de atención fragmentada y falta de futuro que define la psicología de la ansiedad. En muchos casos, esa representación de la ansiedad climática se ve respaldada y amplificada por el compromiso de la literatura con las noticias y las redes sociales que están asociadas con una ruptura del enfoque de atención. Para explorar esos vínculos, me baso en trabajos sobre la fenomenología de la ansiedad y analizo ejemplos de la literatura estadounidense contemporánea y, más específicamente, de los cuentos de Lauren Groff y la novela *Weather* de Jenny Offill. Muestro cómo estas obras capturan la conexión entre la conciencia sobre el cambio climático y el estilo mental único de los protagonistas, y cómo el realismo cognitivo a menudo va acompañado de un diálogo con las formas de comunicación digital.

Palabras clave: incertidumbre; econarratología; brevedad; forma; ficción estadounidense contemporánea.

Résumé : Les chercheurs de nombreux domaines accordent une attention croissante à l'impact psychologique du changement climatique. Cet article se concentre sur la fiction littéraire qui met en avant ces ramifications psychologiques ; en d'autres termes, une fiction qui met en scène des personnages confrontés à ce qui a été diversement appelé « anxiété écologique » ou « anxiété climatique ». Je soutiens que la forme de l'histoire courte et sa brièveté au niveau stylistique peuvent poursuivre le réalisme cognitif en évoquant le sentiment d'attention fragmentée et d'absence d'avenir qui définit la psychologie de l'anxiété. Dans de nombreux cas, cette représentation de l'anxiété climatique est soutenue et amplifiée par l'engagement de la littérature dans l'actualité et les médias sociaux qui sont associés à une rupture de concentration attentionnelle. Pour explorer ces liens, je m'appuie sur des travaux sur la phénoménologie de l'anxiété et discute d'exemples tirés de la littérature américaine contemporaine, et plus particu-

lièrement des nouvelles de Lauren Groff et du roman *Weather* de Jenny Offill. Je montre comment ces œuvres capturent le lien entre la conscience du changement climatique et le style d'esprit unique des protagonistes, et comment le réalisme cognitif s'accompagne souvent d'un dialogue avec les formes de communication numérique.

Mots-clés : incertitude ; éconarratologie ; brièveté ; forme ; fiction américaine contemporaine.

The climate crisis doesn't only give rise to unprecedented material, technological, and political challenges, but it also takes a heavy toll on mental health. Philosopher Glenn Albrecht ("Solastalgia") was among the first to acknowledge this psychological dimension of climate change through the lens of the concept of "solastalgia", which he views as an environmental equivalent of nostalgia. If nostalgia is longing for an irretrievable past, solastalgia describes the way in which climate change is dramatically transforming our experience of landscape: our perception of a certain location is completely decoupled from our memories, because that familiar place has become unrecognizable. This type of impact is increasingly recognized in fields ranging from the environmental humanities to clinical psychology: awareness of the changing climate is correlated with psychological disorders including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress (for a helpful survey, see Palinkas and Wong). The word "awareness" covers considerable ground here. It can refer to the traumatic experiences of individuals who are directly affected by the catastrophic manifestations of climate change —deadly heat waves, flooding, and so on. But awareness can also denote a more distant type of threat, whereby climate change-related disruptions are still largely hypothetical or resist sensationalist framings. Nevertheless, the "slow violence" (Nixon) of these environmental transformations already weighs on people's daily experience and ability or willingness to imagine the future.

This more diffuse psychological impact of climate change is sometimes discussed under the heading of eco- or climate anxiety, a phenomenon that is attracting increasing attention in psychology, particularly as it shapes the lives of younger generations or of those involved in the environmental movement[1]. Uncertainty as to what the future will look like, individually and collectively, is a major driver of anxiety (see Grupe and

1 For more on the definition and scope of climate anxiety, see Clayton. I will use "eco-" and "climate anxiety" interchangeably in what follows: the former concerns ecological disruptions in general, while the latter has to do with the consequences of climate change specifically, but as my examples will show it is often difficult to differentiate these emotions in practice.

Nitschke), and the uncertainty that surrounds the climate crisis is no exception. As Susan Clayton writes, climate change "is ongoing and developing, so simple adaptation to the change is not completely possible; it is uncertain, so anxiety may be a more common response than fear; […] and it is a major, significant threat" (2). Indeed, climate change threatens to destabilize individual lives, for instance in terms of job security, living conditions, and parenthood, but it also jeopardizes the institutions that guarantee social continuity —"ontological security", in Anthony Giddens's phrase. All of these factors are closely correlated with anxiety.

In *A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety*, environmental humanities scholar Sarah Jacquette Ray encapsulates the despair created by climate change in an anecdote, which will sound familiar to anyone involved in teaching cultural representations of climate change. Ray asked a group of environmental science students to outline the concrete steps they could take to improve their own lives, and those of others, ten years into the future. The concreteness of the exercise was meant to be empowering, but to Ray's surprise the students couldn't come up with anything, they couldn't visualize the future at all. Ray's diagnosis is that the students were paralyzed by eco-anxiety, to the point that "they [were] unable to desire —or, yes, even imagine— the future" (2).

Contemporary literature doesn't suffer from the same problem: fiction writers are envisioning a wide range of future scenarios, largely in a negative, dystopian vein, but there are also attempts to offer more positive models of what has been called a "good Anthropocene" (Bennett et al.). The loose concept of "climate fiction" or "cli-fi" spans multiple literary modes and affects (see Caracciolo, Ferebee, et al.), and the quality and originality of this type of writing is also fairly diverse. The literary mode of realism, in particular, has become contested in ecocritical debates, leading Lynn Badia, Marija Cetinić, and Jeff Diamanti to argue that "climate change seems to resist the mimetic tradition of realism, because its effects are planetary, gradual, and ultimately irreducible to human perspective" (3). For commentators such as Amitav Ghosh, "serious fiction" —a genre that he aligns with the tradition of Western realism— struggles to come to terms with the sheer improbability of climate catastrophe. The realist novel did not develop to deal with this type of existential challenge. Instead, Ghosh suggests that non-realist genres such as "romance", "fantasy", "horror", and "science fiction" are better equipped than realism to convey the threat posed by climate change (24)[2]. In a similar vein, Kara Selmin and Cydney Langill argue for the "weirding" of cinematic realism. Focusing on Alex Garland's films, Selmin and Langill discuss a range of cinematic techniques that

2 Ghosh is actually quite dismissive of these alternatives to "serious fiction" —a point that has come under scrutiny in critical responses to his book (see, e.g., Heise).

highlight the strangeness of human-nonhuman relations. A literary equivalent might be Jeff VanderMeer, whose affectively complex, "New Weird" fiction, has been widely read in the context of the climate crisis (Ulstein, Hegglund).

Of course, not all climate fiction is empathically anti-mimetic or speculative: numerous contemporary novels stage climate change debates without departing from the basic conventions of mimetic representation —a lifelike storyworld, a focus on mundane events and interpersonal interactions, and so on. But even these novels —examples include Ian McEwan's *Solar* and Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior*— bring subtle variations to the realist formula: as argued by Adeline Johns-Putra, their realism changes in response to the instability and uncertainty of our times. Johns-Putra ("Climate and History" 251–52) builds on Walter Benjamin's concept of "Stillstellung" or "moment of arrest" to conceptualize this deviation from conventional forms of realism. In my examples, as I will show below, the rejection of closure and the possibility of distance in reader-protagonist interactions introduce such moments of arrest.

Within the broad category of realist climate fiction, this article zooms in on what I call, following Emily Troscianko, "cognitive realism": the way in which literary fiction can evoke the workings of various mental processes "according to the best understanding available in current cognitive science" (*Kafka's Cognitive Realism* 2). While Troscianko focuses on realist techniques directed at memory (Troscianko, "Cognitive Realism") and visual perception (Troscianko, *Kafka's Cognitive Realism*), I will explore how climate fiction pursues cognitive realism by portraying characters experiencing eco-anxiety. An important difference between my use of the concept of cognitive realism and Troscianko's is that I adopt a broader understanding of the word "cognitive" —not only referring to cognitive science but also to the phenomenology or lived experience of certain mental states (in this case, anxiety). Moreover, unlike Troscianko, I see cognitive realism as a way of reading particular literary forms *in light of* insights into psychological or phenomenological structures. In my discussion, cognitive realism is not something texts practice on their own but rather a way of approaching the significance of formal devices in the interpretation of climate fiction.

In *Narrating the Mesh*, I argued that fiction's confrontation with the climate crisis is not only a matter of representing the crisis directly but of developing narrative forms that can convey the scale of its material impact on the planet. Here I shift the emphasis from material to psychological impact, but I am still conceptualizing form as an essential bridge between climate change and literary representation. More specifically, I draw a link between cognitively realistic representations of eco-anxiety and a set of formal techniques that I refer to as "short forms". As I will show in the following pages, brevity on a

narrative and stylistic level plays an important role in the realist strand of climate fiction. My article investigates the affordances of brevity in that type of fiction, how it registers important cultural transformations and psychological tensions in Western societies — how, put more strongly, brevity reflects the experiential forms of anxiety itself. I derive the term "affordances" from Caroline Levine's (5–11) New Formalism, which in turn lifts it from the field of design: an affordance is a possibility inherent in a form, a way in which shape steers usage, including the production of meaning[3].

I understand brevity in two ways: as a function of *genre*, in the short story; and as a function of *style*, in longer textual forms (such as the novel) that nevertheless create an impression of brevity through stylistic and syntactic fragmentation. Both forms of brevity are present (sometimes in conjunction) in climate fiction that offers cognitively realistic depictions of eco-anxiety. My examples come from contemporary US literature: respectively, for brevity on the level of genre I will discuss Lauren Groff's short stories (in the collection *Florida* and the stand-alone digital book *Boca Raton*), whereas for stylistic brevity I will turn to Jenny Offill's novel *Weather*. Before outlining those readings, I will add a few considerations on what makes short forms so suitable for expressing eco-anxiety. This will involve a detour through the way in which digital technologies contribute to anxiety disorders by disrupting our attention and presenting us with a multiplicity of catastrophic scenarios. The remediation of these technologies in my case studies (but more pronouncedly in Offill's novel) helps bridge the gap between short forms in literature and the experiential forms of climate anxiety.

1. Brevity Between Technology and Psychology

In an influential article, N. Katherine Hayles distinguishes between two cognitive modes of attention: deep and hyper attention. The former is the sustained attention required by long literary works such as the Victorian novel, which are usually read in extended sessions with limited tolerance for external stimuli or distractions. Hyper attention, by contrast, is the ability to juggle multiple streams of information, the kind of multitasking typical of our connected, digital age. Deep attention is a long-term, steady effort, whereas hyper attention works in short bursts. Hayles identifies a historical shift from deep to hyper attention and traces it to the pervasiveness of digital technologies, with their tendency to present us with images and information in quick succession. As I discussed in past work (Caracciolo, "Remediating"), literary genres that are conven-

3 James Gibson is usually credited with introducing the concept of "affordance" in ecological psychology before it entered the theory of design.

tionally associated with deep attention —first and foremost, the novel— are increasingly influenced by the forms underlying digital technologies: they integrate and rework the affordances of digital practices including social media and video games, and in doing so they also comment on the hyper attention that tends to define the user's experience of these platforms. In many instances, the reworking involves an ideological critique of our culture's obsession with connection and multitasking; but the intermedial dialogue is also an opportunity for literary experimentation and innovation.

That dialogue between literature and digital media helps contextualize the emergence of short forms in climate fiction. As we go about our days, the news media bombard us with broken temperature records, images of catastrophic events around the world, and catastrophic projections for the future —a constant flow of bleak data that feeds pessimism and a sense of impotence. This barrage takes advantage of hyper attention, our tendency to split our attention between seemingly unrelated events occurring in different parts of the world. The result is what Heather Houser calls "infowhelm", a feeling of being overwhelmed by information that is likely to exacerbate the well-documented mental health impact of negative news coverage (Johnston and Davey)[4]. For Houser, infowhelm can numb us into accepting the inevitability of ecological collapse. The phenomenon of "doomscrolling" is perhaps the clearest manifestation of how the stream of bad news is both cognitively captivating and pragmatically debilitating[5]. Houser suggests that contemporary literature serves as a "space of interpretive activity that diagnoses infowhelm —and, in some cases, even reproduces it— and experiments with ways of managing it" (2).

Infowhelm is also a driver of, or at least implicated in, climate anxiety. Shannon Lambert (chap. 4) draws a connection between infowhelm and climate anxiety in a reading of the same authors featured in my discussion, a short story by Groff (*Boca Raton*) and Offill's *Weather*. Extending Lambert's analysis, I link the cognitive realism of climate fiction to both phenomenological insights and larger debates on the influence of the news media and digital technologies on the forms of the contemporary novel[6]. A rather crude way of phrasing the main claim of this article would be to say that, in realist climate fiction, brevity expresses the shortening of our attention span when confronted with both media infowhelm and with the magnitude of the crisis we are facing.

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4 This is not to say that the news media or digital technologies are the sole cause of climate anxiety, of course —but they are likely to aggravate existing mental health challenges.

5 Sharma et al. define doomscrolling as "a unique media habit where social media users persistently attend to negative information in their newsfeeds about crises, disasters, and tragedies" (1).

6 I am indebted to Lambert for numerous conversations on the topic of literary form, climate change, and its psychological impacts.

In reality, mapping any given literary form onto cultural developments and tendencies is a tricky business. In his account of microfiction, William Nelles also acknowledges that "attributing the boom in short forms to alleged deficiencies in the attention spans of contemporary readers […] [is] too dependent upon merely anecdotal evidence to be granted without reservations, but some subtypes of microfiction are almost certainly dictated, or at least enabled, by historical rather than strictly formal factors" (88). While the climate fictions I will discuss here cannot be categorized as microfiction, their focus on brevity on the level of both genre and style certainly results from an alignment of historical contingencies and formal affordances, and in fact in some of these works the link between digital infowhelm and climate anxiety isn't only suggested formally but explored thematically as well[7].

There is, however, a further element I would like to introduce to complicate the connection between formal and cultural dimensions of brevity: it has to do with the phenomenology of anxiety and how it is realistically evoked, via the protagonists' unique "mind style", in the climate fictions I explore in the following sections[8]. While there is plenty of scholarship on literary narrative and mental illness (see, e.g., Bernaerts et al.), anxiety disorders are typically not very prominent in these discussions, and even less attention has been devoted to the *phenomenological* dimension of anxiety and how it can be encapsulated by literary forms. An important exception is Leila Michelle Vaziri's phenomenological study of anxiety in contemporary British theater, which also features a chapter on ecological crisis (Vaziri chap. 5). Extending Vaziri's analysis to prose fiction, the hypothesis I would like to put forward here is that brevity can be so effective at probing climate anxiety because it crystallizes the experiential forms of anxiety in a cognitively realistic manner.

Stefano Micali offers a comprehensive survey of these experiential forms, building on a long history of discussions in philosophy and phenomenology. While anxiety, fear, and terror fall on an emotional continuum, anxiety can be typically distinguished from the other two because it doesn't have a clear-cut intentional object. Grammatically, this is expressed by the fact that one can be afraid or scared *of* something, but the same preposition "of" would sound unidiomatic for "anxious": instead, one feels anxious "about" something, which suggests a more diffuse or vague relation between the emotion and its objects. "Anxiety attacks us from the rear because it is not possible to iden-

7 See also the discussion of flash fiction in Erin James's (85–86) Anthropocene narrative theory. Like me, James sees extreme brevity as inspired by the material forms of the internet, but she doesn't draw a further link with psychological responses to the Anthropocene.

8 The term "mind style" —for the linguistic presentation of recurring patterns in a fictional character's mental processes— was introduced by Roger Fowler in 1977.

tify its source", writes Micali (6). Thus, drawing on the work of neo-phenomenologist Hermann Schmitz, Micali describes anxiety ("Angst" in German) as "atmospheric fear" (176), which highlights the pervasiveness of anxiety, how it tends to take up mental and interpersonal space rather than target particular objects and events. Equally important is the perceived loss of control that accompanies anxiety: unlike fear, anxiety doesn't result in a fight-or-flight response, but rather in what Micali calls "a negative and alien power" (63) taking over one's thoughts. The relationship with this power is complicated: more often than not, the anxious subject is attracted to the loss of agency, which is seen as inevitable but also as liberating precisely because of its inevitability.

Finally, the temporality of anxiety is future-oriented and involves a "projection of confused and vague possibilities" (Micali 155): the future shatters into a series of contradictory scenarios, all of them negatively connoted but also vague and ill-defined. Long-term planning becomes impossible, but the experience of the present is also disrupted in that we are lost in a thicket of unrealized and mostly undesirable possibilities[9]. Diffuseness, atmospheric pervasiveness, loss of control, and breakdown of temporal experience are thus the most salient phenomenological structures of anxiety in general, and it shouldn't be too difficult to see how climate anxiety amplifies these experiential forms: the climate is by definition something vague, pervasive, and that eludes our control[10]. The discourse of climate science frequently invokes conflicting projections for the future, reflecting degrees of global warming or other factors; meanwhile, the infowhelm of the news media divides and fragments our attention, a process that closely resembles the anxious multiplication of scenarios. This structural equivalence explains at least in part why it is so easy to feel anxious about the climate crisis.

In literary fiction, the experiential structures of anxiety can be recreated with considerable precision by short forms. In an influential article on the modern short story, Suzanne Ferguson draws a connection between the genre and literary impressionism, arguing that in the short story "setting may displace event, and […] sentence structures or figurative language may imply relationships not otherwise expressed" (23). This emphasis on setting at the expense of plot and on implied meanings lends the short story a strong atmospheric quality: atmosphere thus takes precedence over narrative progression as the organizing principle of the text[11]. Meanwhile, as Ferguson also highlights,

9 In Caracciolo (*Contemporary Fiction*), I discuss how literary form can negotiate the uncertainty generated by this fragmented imagination of the future.

10 See also Caracciolo, Crockford, et al. for an interview-based study of this phenomenological dimension of climate change.

11 On atmosphere, see Gumbrecht's account —which focuses on the bodily nature of literary atmospheres— and also Taylor (6–17) for an ecocritical perspective linking meteorological and affective dimensions of the concept. In

internal focalization results in the foregrounding of an individual character's psychology. Yet the brevity and allusiveness of the text often frustrate the possibility of resolution: the central psychological knot or tension faced by the protagonist is not fully resolved by an ending that remains affectively vague and narratively open. In the next section, I will show how these formal characteristics enable the short story to realistically articulate the experiential forms of climate anxiety in Lauren Groff's fiction. I will then turn to how stylistic brevity performs a similar function in Offill's novel *Weather*.

2. Threat and Climate in Groff's Short Fiction

Florida is a collection of eleven short stories, many of them set in the titular US state and revolving around character narrators —typically young mothers— who struggle to cope with an uncertain future. In effect, the stories often read as imaginative variations on the same motif of ecological threat, which is located within Florida's lush natural environment —seen as simultaneously appealing and menacing. Climate change is mentioned a few times, but Groff often foregrounds perils of a more particularized nature —dangerous animals lurking in the forest, a hurricane near the protagonist's home, and so on. And yet, these threats are also incongruously and paranoically linked: entities as different as an aggressive predator, a sinkhole, and extreme weather are perceived as part of the same conspiracy against the protagonist.

As we read in "The Midnight Zone", "safety was twenty miles away and there was a panther between us and there, but also possibly terrible men, sinkholes, alligators, the end of the world" ("The Midnight Zone" 73). This type of enumeration is one of the hallmarks of Groff's style and suggests that the protagonist's mind is increasingly occupied by anxieties that, while vaguely environmental in nature, never stem from a single cause. The rapid escalation from alligators to the "end of the world" is in itself tied to the multiplication of scenarios and loss of control that defines the experience of anxiety, as I discussed in the previous section. Environmental threat, here and throughout the collection, is a presence that surrounds the protagonists physically and affectively. Perhaps most importantly, this atmosphere of threat is distributed across narrative space: danger arises from various aspects of the setting, such as the sinkhole of "Flower Hunters" or the dilapidated house of "Eyewall". It can even emerge from a toilet, as in the ending of "Snake Stories", in which the protagonist wakes up "in the middle of the night […] and stood and checked all the windows and all the doors, I closed all the toilet lids,

broad strokes, both Gumbrecht and Taylor present atmosphere as a felt, affective quality emerging from the interaction of literary form and themes. This is also the basis for the references to atmosphere in my textual analyses.

because, even though I was naked and the night was freezing, in this world of ours you can never really know" ("Snake Stories" 214).

Florida itself is described as an "Eden of dangerous things" ("Flower Hunters" 160), but the danger takes different forms depending on the specifics of the protagonists' material situation —their being young mothers, their physical isolation, their existential precarity on the margin of urban life. The ubiquity of the threat —within each story, and throughout the collection— suggests that threat isn't merely contingent in the world of *Florida* but existential, the very medium in which these women's stories unfold. This is part of the cognitive realism of Groff's stories: the stylistic focus on an ominous atmosphere reflects the loose quality of climate anxiety, but also its pervasive negativity, which colors whatever object or event that comes close to the protagonists.

Infowhelm plays a role in these stories, too. In "Ghosts and Empties", the protagonist remarks:

> During the day, while my sons are in school, I can't stop reading about the disaster of the world, the glaciers dying like living creatures, the great Pacific trash gyre, the hundreds of unrecorded deaths of species, millennia snuffed out as if they were not precious. I read and savagely mourn, as if reading could somehow sate this hunger for grief, instead of what it does, which is fuel it ("Ghosts and Empties" 7).

Haphazard images of disasters unfolding across space (from glaciers to the Pacific) and time ("millennia") are linked to the protagonist's media consumption —the "reading" presumably happens on a screen here, although the text doesn't spell it out. These visions of disaster give rise to negative emotions (primarily grief) that sustain themselves in a psychologically destabilizing spiral. The contradictions of doom-and-gloom discourse are clearly articulated: the path that goes from environmental awareness to action is dark and convoluted, and the bleak listing of catastrophic events —the infowhelm of climate disaster— can prove psychologically paralyzing instead of politically stimulating (see O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole).

Many of Groff's short stories are cognitively realistic studies in this type of paralysis, and their fragmentary and open-ended form translates this experience into the language of narrative structure. "Snake Stories" starts as a series of paragraph-long fragments, thematically linked by the titular reptile. A story of marital infidelity within an exhausted long-term relationship slowly comes into focus, but the tensions introduced by Groff never find resolution or closure: the ending, with the protagonist's already mentioned closing of the toilet lids, is profoundly ambiguous. Another story by Groff not included in this collection but also set in Florida, *Boca Raton*, centers on a woman suffering from severe insomnia. Unlike the stories of *Florida*, which feature

first-person narrators, here we have a combination of heterodiegetic narration and internal focalization. For several nights in a row, the protagonist is unable to sleep, kept up by nightmarish visions, which the narrator describes as "a hurricane of so many elements —plastics and sea risings and drought and hunger" (*Boca Raton* n.p.). The story's disjointed form, with its succession of short unnumbered fragments, mirrors the disorientation of the woman's mind as it descends into delirium. The ending is highly ambiguous, with the protagonist alone on the beach at night, the darkness enveloping her an explicit atmospheric materialization of "the dread that had followed her down here" (*Boca Raton* n.p.).

In this story, and throughout the collection *Florida*, the suspension of novelistic progression is another feature of the short story form through which Groff offers a cognitively realistic depiction of climate anxiety, particularly its "projection of confused and vague possibilities", to quote again from Micali's discussion (155) . In line with the impressionism of the modern short story, Groff's fiction privileges atmosphere over plot: the ending opens onto a future that is as uncertain as it is ominous. Groff's endings strongly resist teleology and closure, a device that reflects the protagonists' psychological impasse as they struggle with the ramifications of the climate crisis and the infowhelm it generates. The loss of agency that defines the phenomenology of anxiety manifests itself as an inability to steer the narrative towards a meaningful outcome. For the reader, this lack of closure may result in what Johns-Putra ("Climate and History") would call, building on Benjamin, a "moment of arrest": we are invited to take a step back from the protagonist and consider ways in which we may avoid feeling overwhelmed by the uncertainty of climate change. This invitation becomes even more explicit in Offill's novel, as we will see in the next section.

3. Fragmented Temporalities in Offill's *Weather*

At around two hundred pages, Jenny Offill's *Weather* can perhaps be described as a short novel or novella, but certainly not as a short story. Nevertheless, the fragmentation we have seen at work in Groff's enumerations becomes even more pronounced here, also conveying the psychological breakdowns and tensions caused by climate anxiety. In other words, brevity in *Weather* isn't a matter of textual length but of style and syntax. The impression left by the book's first pages is remarkably discontinuous, with brief paragraphs, sometimes just one or two sentences long. For example:

> I can't get to Sylvia afterward. There are too many people. I walk to the subway, trying to think about the world.

> Young person worry: What if nothing I do matters?
>
> Old person worry: What if everything I do does? (21–22).

Like most of the novel, the first sentence is cast in the form of present-tense narrative, which creates an impression of raw, unfiltered immediacy[12]. But the two lines that follow mark a sudden shift in discourse type, from the particularity of narrative to the aphoristic enunciation of a general truth. Statements of this type punctuate Offill's work, and of course one could argue that their function is primarily ironic: they are not meant to be taken at face value but to be understood as a reflection of the facile wisdom that circulates on social media, with the conciseness of the tweet being an obvious parallel to the aphorisms of Offill's narrator. The discourses of spirituality and self-help —in themselves a staple of social media discussions— are also an important source: the novel brims with references to Christian eschatology, Buddhism, and yoga. Typographically demarcated sections mimic customer satisfaction surveys or ask questions such as "What are the best ways to prepare my children for the coming chaos?" (92). Through their mosaic of quotations and references, the six chapters of *Weather* appear to be profoundly shaped by the forms of digital communication.

This isn't to say that we are supposed to take the questioning of Offill's narrator as a mere parody of the shallowness of social media culture: clearly, these interrogations are not a witty façade but originate from the affective reality of the narrator's anxieties. However, the brevity of enunciation, together with the decontextualization of these statements, keeps the narrator from answering the questions she raises —and perhaps also from fully grasping their significance. The depiction of the narrator's existential impasse can have a distancing effect on readers, something akin to a Benjaminian moment of arrest (see again Johns-Putra, "Climate and History"): readers are stopped in their tracks and invited to acknowledge the limitations of the protagonist's mindset as she struggles to make sense of the infowhelm of reality —a point to which I will return in the conclusion.

Despite the fragmentation of this collage, it is possible to piece together the novel's plot, and climate anxieties feature prominently in it. The protagonist and narrator, a librarian, is hired as a personal assistant by her former academic advisor, Sylvia, the host of a popular podcast on the subject of the ecological crisis. Sylvia complains that she is unable to keep up with the increasing number of emails she receives, hence the need for an assistant: "everyone who writes", Sylvia declares, "is either crazy or

12 For more on the effects of present-tense narration, see Gebauer's study.

depressed" (24). The list-like flow of the novel, with its snippets of present-text narrative mixed with gnomic statements and other textual materials, echoes the accumulative logic of the internet, where media infowhelm coexists with personal messages and the minor or major dramas of selfhood. The novel's style also captures, in a cognitively realistic manner, the effects of this bombardment on the narrator's mindset. As the narrative progresses, ecological concerns loom larger and larger in the narrator's present-tense monologue, usually in conjunction with the worries of parenthood, of raising children in a climate-changed world[13].

Offill's work thus recreates the experiential forms of climate anxiety: while the anxiety is future-directed, precisely like the narrator's concern for the wellbeing of her daughter, it leads to a disjointed experience of the present. This fracturing of the present is reflected by the jumble of sensations and observations that never cohere in Offill's prose. The immediate inspiration for that cognitively realistic form is to be found in the brevity of social media expression, as I mentioned. The tweet-like logic of Offill's syntax mirrors an anxious confusion of future possibilities, but it also hints at the digital technologies that are responsible for feeding those anxieties. If the terseness of Offill's prose fuses stylistic form with the experiential structures of anxiety, the language of the internet serves a double function: it facilitates the mapping between the literary and the psychological, but it also identifies one of the root causes of the anxiety experienced by Offill's protagonist.

Like Groff's, Offill's fiction is intensely atmospheric rather than plot-driven, but the atmosphere it evokes is considerably different from Groff's stories: instead of the menace oozing from the latter, Offill's reader is immersed in a world of spiritual longing that keeps being frustrated or falling short of expectations —largely because the protagonist's hyper attention keeps her from engaging in more sustained reflection on the stakes of the climate crisis. While tonally different from Groff's approach, Offill's depiction of eco-anxiety results in a similarly open ending: "I wake to the sound of gunshots. Walnuts on the roof, Ben [the protagonist's husband] says. The core delusion is that I am here and you are there" (204). These are the last words of the novel, and they are remarkably ambiguous. Reality oscillates between the threat of gunshots and harmless walnuts. Even more strikingly, the final sentence —in Offill's typical gnomic style —is left unattributed. It is unclear if this is something that the narrator says to Ben, or Ben to her, or the narrator to the book's reader. The idea of separation as delusion seems lifted from the narrator's Buddhist readings, but the

13 See also Johns-Putra ("My Job") for discussion of parental care in environmental fiction.

relation between this thought and the possible gunshots remains uncertain. Perhaps it is meant as a reassuring, comforting statement, but it doesn't dispel the tense atmosphere completely.

The novel thus opens onto an indeterminate future, toying with spiritual revelations but unable to formulate the truths that the aphoristic nature of Offill's prose seems to require. Climate anxiety persists beyond the ending, but the novel provides readers with a means of channeling this anxiety more effectively than the protagonist. A URL appears after the last page: it points to a companion website asking readers to "get involved" and including information on environmental organizations such as the Sunrise Movement and Extinction Rebellion[14]. This invitation to participate in climate-focused initiatives creates a Benjaminian "moment of arrest" by drawing attention to how readers may differ from the emotionally overwhelmed narrator, whose anxiety (depicted in a cognitively realistic way by the novel's brevity) precludes political involvement. This is another way in which contemporary realist fiction seeks to both integrate the digital world and highlight the urgency of climate action.

4. Conclusion

My main goal in this article was to show how brevity, in both narrative and stylistic terms, articulates the experience of eco-anxiety in cognitive realistic ways —that is, in ways that align with our understanding of the phenomenology of anxiety. I have focused on anxiety as a long-term effect of climate change, which is distinct from the more traumatic manifestations of experienced climate disaster, but just as psychologically significant. Likewise, the discussion has foregrounded the realist strand of climate fiction as opposed to postapocalyptic, speculative, or "New Weird" fiction. This doesn't mean that eco-anxiety cannot emerge in anti-mimetic climate fiction, but it is usually captured obliquely or allegorically. By contrast, in the realist works by Groff and Offill I explored here, eco-anxiety tends to be staged directly, through interactions between theme and form that give rise to a distinctive affective atmosphere. Anxiety is hinted at by short forms that suggest discontinuity, ambiguity, and a breakdown of closure. These formal strategies resemble and crystallize the structural forms of anxiety, turning literature into a means of phenomenological exploration. Groff's stories riff on the motif of a young mother experiencing a diffuse environmental threat and struggling to make sense of a future that looks fragmented and incoherent. Their endings are stubbornly open, the stories claustrophobically centered on the protagonist without the possibility of expe-

14 https://www.obligatorynoteofhope.com/.

riential counterpoint. Offill's novel comprises a series of present-tense fragments that only indirectly trace a narrative. Influenced by the brevity of social media, the syntax recreates the protagonist's inability to ground her life in a stable system of meaning, despite her repeated longing for spiritual experience. Moreover, in both Groff's and Offill's works, brevity evokes the complex dialogue between literary forms, the lived experience of climate anxiety, and the technological devices that, by enabling infowhelm, feed such anxiety.

Readers are thus immersed in the psychological consequences of climate change, but they are also given an opportunity to distance themselves from these feelings, including these feelings as they resonate with their own psychological responses to the climate crisis[15]. Not only do literary forms mirror experiential structures, but they also hold out the promise of transforming the reader's outlook on climate crisis and, potentially, on how to avoid being overwhelmed by climate anxiety. This is what Don Kuiken, David Miall, and Shelley Sikora call "self-modifying feelings" in reading[16]. This type of psychological transformation will not be automatically triggered for all readers of fiction by Groff and Offill, of course: the preconditions for that transformation are complex and context-dependent. But self-modification is a possibility inherent in these stories of climate anxiety, and it is tightly linked to the cognitive realism afforded by short forms.

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15 See also my discussion of character-reader engagements in *Strange Narrators* (chap.1) and how experiential distance from the protagonist may play an important role in literary interpretation.

16 Researchers in the field of "empirical ecocriticism" are currently studying the influence of climate fiction on readers' environmental attitudes (see Schneider-Mayerson et al.).

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