

**Storying Climate Change:
Narrative, Imagination, Justice, Resilience
Catriona Sandilands, York University**

Storying Climate Change: The Problem

Amid incontrovertible evidence of rapid environmental transformation caused by anthropogenic climate change, there is no shortage of imagery designed to bring home the severity of the global crisis that faces us. Former US Vice President Al Gore's documentary film *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), for example, includes an iconic scene of Gore on a cherry picker, his body on the mechanical lift going up and down – and up, and up – along with a red graph line illustrating projected CO₂ emissions for the next 50 years. Even more dramatically, photographer James Balog's beautiful film *Chasing Ice* (2012) includes scene after scene – both time-lapse and real time – of huge glaciers breaking apart and crashing into the sea. These images are extremely powerful. As students and others have told me repeatedly, however, they are also decidedly depressing, as the films give no indication of what people can actually do in their lives to respond to these events on anything like the scale that seems necessary (switching to compact fluorescent light bulbs, as Gore advocates, hardly seems to matter). Partly in response to this problem, the recent documentary *This Changes Everything* (2015, based on Naomi Klein's 2014 book of the same title), aims to empower people to work toward change by portraying seven individuals and communities on the front lines of climate activism. Rather than use the apocalyptic rhetoric of preventing (largely) forecasted devastation to terrify people into changing their behaviour “or else,” *This Changes Everything* presents climate change as part of people's everyday lives in the present moment: immediate, tangible, and devastating, but also actionable. Especially in the midst of Klein's carefully optimistic telling, these seven stories connect to form interdependent parts of a transformative imagination that takes networked local struggles for environmental justice, rather than the overwhelming threat of impending global crisis, as its primary narrative structure. And *This Changes Everything* presents a powerful imagination indeed: communities working to protect local lives and livelihoods against specific threats (a Cree woman in Northern Alberta trying to understand the impact of the Tar Sands on her people, a village in Andhra Pradesh protecting a wetland against a proposed coal-fired power plant) are presented as concrete protagonists in very current stories of environmental justice, to which viewers are asked to relate on a human and empathetic level, as opposed to Gore's and Balog's abstract exhortations to be afraid for the future of the planet as a whole.

Stories are vital elements in our responses to climate change. As scholars of environmental communication (e.g., Carvalho and Peterson), rhetoric (e.g., Eubanks),

and literary criticism (e.g., LeMenager) have argued, public climate change stories shape how we understand the present, imagine the future, and conceive of possible interventions between the now and the then. But we also inherit many of the structures of these stories – genres, conventions, frames – from older literary traditions. Although as Buell, Garrard and many other environmental literary and cultural critics (ecocritics) have documented, apocalypticism has been the dominant trope of mainstream environmentalist literature at least since the publication of Rachel Carson’s pivotal book *Silent Spring* in 1964 (of which Gore, not coincidentally, considers himself the inheritor), it has never been the only literary convention available with which to tell environmental stories. As Cannon and others note, since the 1970s, environmental justice stories – Klein’s included – have often followed a broadly “David and Goliath” trajectory, which both reflects the reality of individual and community struggles against large institutions and specifically frames those struggles in hopeful terms (we know that David wins). More empowering though it may be, however, this story is only one among the many that we need to tell to give meaning to our current and future experiences, especially given the complexity of the response that is demanded by climate change. What about stories of coming of age or other personal growth and transformation in climate changing times (*bildungsroman*) that might serve as meditations on new kinds of global anthropocene subjectivity for young people (e.g., Ozeki’s *All Over Creation*)? What about stories that focus on the humour, pathos, interconnection, vulnerability, and resilience of communities faced with futures that are rendered profoundly uncertain because of industrial energy developments (e.g., Hogan’s *Solar Storms*)? What about stories that allow tragedy to unfold, including the realities of present climate-related losses, and that might allow us to engage in the acts of mourning that are so often dismissed as regressive in the rush toward climate “solutions” (e.g., King’s *The Back of the Turtle*)? Despite its own apocalyptic origins (e.g., McCarthy’s violent post-apocalyptic novel *The Road*, which climate luminary George Monbiot singled out as “the most important environmental book ever written”), so-called “Cli Fi” is not monolithic, can include many genres, and can perhaps give rise to new ones. It is thus very important to think about these ongoing and emergent forms critically and use them creatively in order to explore the full potential of literature and creative writing to inspire and shape responses to climate change: resistance, mitigation and, whether we like it or not, adaptation.

Now that there is no longer such a need (one hopes) to marshal and present evidence for anthropogenic climate change, the kinds of story we are telling about climate are even more important. The Trudeau Foundation project *Storying Climate Change: Narrative, Imagination, Justice, Resilience* thus focuses on stories and narrative forms as ways of exploring, identifying, creating and pursuing emotionally, socially and temporally complex responses to climate change, including causes and effects, mitigations and adaptations, losses and forms of resilience. Particularly in the last ten years, ecocritical scholars have discussed widely the importance of fiction, poetry and plays in

representing complex and embedded relations to climate and energy issues (e.g., Adamson, Ballard, Bergthaller, Campbell, Clark, Heise, Johns-Putra, LeMenager, McHolm, McMurry, O'Brien, Siperstein, Szeman, Trexler, Wallace), including questions of genre, temporality, speculation, subjectivity, scale, power, and justice. In very general terms, these scholars argue that literary depictions of present and future climate change begin the work of imagining what mitigation and adaptation involve and feel like, and of understanding the personal, social and psychological complexity of climate change impacts. They emphasize the importance of understanding the multiple forms of inequality with which experiences of climate change are inevitably entangled and which will likely only be exacerbated in the coming decades (part of what ecocritic Rob Nixon calls "slow violence"). And they underscore the need to imagine responses to climate change that combine desires for resilience with desires for justice, participation and meaningful community.

In Canada as elsewhere, these justice considerations especially concern Indigenous peoples, whose lives, livelihoods, wellbeing, and cultures are especially tied to particular lands and landscapes, for example, in terms of gathering, hunting and fishing (e.g., George), economic infrastructure (e.g., Weller and Lange), water quality and availability (e.g., Grover), traditional food resources (e.g., Turner), health and mental health (e.g., Willox), sovereignty (e.g., Vendiola), and culturally-significant stories (e.g., Armstrong). At the same time, however, First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples in Canada continue to practice cultural and scientific traditions that have enabled them to respond to environmental changes – traditions that include storytelling as an integral part of environmental understanding – for millennia. Indigenous initiatives such as the Déline Knowledge Project explore how wisdom carried in traditional stories can be used to understand the ecological and social changes accompanying climate transformation; at the same time, Indigenous storytellers, writers, and artists have braided that wisdom into new forms in order to confront relations between settler colonialism and environmental and social degradation (Dion). Thus, the specific experiences of Indigenous peoples on the front lines of energy struggle and climate transformation will be placed at the centre of *Storying Climate Change*, in order to foreground issues about place, land, loss, livelihood, resilience, culture, sovereignty, decolonization and storytelling that First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities have already raised in relation to climate change (e.g., Atleo, Berkes, Cruikshank, Grossman and Parker, Krupnik and Jolly, Kunuk, Leduc, Thomas and Twyman), and to which we all must pay deep attention.

By engaging respectfully with these different perspectives on climate and story, *Storying Climate Change* proposes to add to existing scholarship and public conversation by asking the following questions: How can different forms of storytelling, literature and creative writing help catalyze broadly public conversations about climate transformation more effectively? How can interdisciplinary and cross-cultural understandings of climate

change (including scientists, policy-analysts and community organizers) be brought into conversation with literary critics and creative writers in order to think about the kinds of stories that are being told – and yet need to be told – as we face present conditions of environmental injustice and climate transformation and work toward future change? How must respectful relations to Indigenous concerns, including recognition of land and treaty rights, be part of this conversation? Perhaps most importantly, how can we represent, conceive and promote stories about climate change that are centred on social justice, equity, and community resilience, addressing both the immediate and the slower violences of climate transformation?

These questions lie at the heart of the Trudeau Foundation theme “People and Their Natural Environment,” in that it exhorts us to think much more creatively about “the identification, evaluation [and] dissemination of sustainable environmental practices.” *Storying Climate Change* thus takes as its primary purpose the imaginative task, beginning in the lived and local conditions of the present, of thinking collectively about climate mitigation and adaptation in ways that respect existing values and relationships – e.g., commitments to social justice, diversity, and equity – and also move beyond “business as usual” practices centred on consumer choice, technology-driven innovation, and minimal public debate (see Flannery). Focused on the specific potential of storytelling and literature to inspire grounded reflection and innovation, and with an eye to thinking critically about the narrative forms that climate change stories follow, *Storying Climate Change* will bring together members of the Trudeau community to discuss the importance of stories in developing responses to climate change, and to create new imaginative trajectories from conversations and collaborations among writers, policy makers, scientists and community organizers. The resulting collection of stories and essays will then form the basis of new public sites (physical and digital) for wider discussion of climate change narrative, experience and response, and for the cultivation of larger personal and institutional creativity. As emphasized by the Trudeau Foundation, questions of environmental justice – meaning the specific impact of climate change on disadvantaged communities in addition to their leadership in developing new stories and policy directions – will be paramount throughout this creative and deliberative process.

Storying Climate Change: The Project

As a scholar, teacher, writer, speaker and mentor in the interdisciplinary environmental humanities whose work has long explored the relations between literary texts and environmental public culture, I have a unique understanding of the roles played (and potentially played) by fiction, poetry and plays in the cultivation of environmental imagination. As I have discussed in such publications as “Acts of Nature: Literature, Excess and Environmental Politics” (2014), “Pro/polis: Three Forays into the Political Lives of Bees” (2014), and “Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies” (2010), stories, fiction, plays and poetry enable readers to enter imaginatively into the experiences of

others and consider what we would think/feel/do in their shoes, both in current conditions and in the richly immediate experiences of other pasts, futures and places that these texts may also present. These immersive worlds are different from, say, the documentary films noted above, in that they often demand that readers take up a position inside the narrative, experiencing the world created by the novel or poem (for example) through their own emotional repertoire, rather than watch the action unfold from the outside and project into the action what they think others might be feeling (Miller, Nussbaum). Fictional texts are also exceptional sites in which readers may imaginatively explore the complex personal, emotional and relational dimensions of historical events, dimensions that often exceed and complicate rational, discursive and generalized understandings of specific happenings and processes (Attridge, Felman). Speculative fiction is especially able to ask about the intimate and relational dimensions of projected futures, apocalyptic, utopian and otherwise (Atwood, Robinson). Poetry and experimental fictions may especially attune us to the ways in which language is crucial in shaping perception, action, and emotion in relation to world events and everyday actions (Gilcrest, McKay). And literary texts as a whole demand from readers a slower development of understanding than that gleaned from headlines and other forms of rapid-fire informational text, producing a reflective, personal and emotional experience of longer duration than offered by most other forms of media (Coleman).

Although there is clearly a role for other arts in the creative cultivation of climate change responses, *Storying Climate Change* centres on the unique capacities of stories, fiction, and poetry to help create space and time for the imagination of climate change, and to engender thoughtful and creative interdisciplinary consideration of the ways in which our responses are embedded (and must be embedded) in complex personal, social, relational and place-based stories that are fundamentally concerned with environmental justice. Building on the important current work of the Trudeau Foundation on climate change response (including the 2014 Trudeau Foundation Conference, “Weathering Change”), *Storying Climate Change* will convene a significant interdisciplinary conversation, extensively involving members of the Trudeau community, in which participants from literature and the humanities will work in collaboration with scientists, activists, and social and policy/political analysts – and with people intimately familiar with current experiences of and adaptations to climate change – to promote public engagement and imagination about meeting the diverse challenges of local and global response. The project necessarily includes an orientation to broader dissemination and discussion: as I describe in “Acts of Nature,” the stories we tell about the environment are not only ends in themselves, but also become meaningful through wider engagement and debate.

Storying Climate Change will, then, involve a unique undertaking in three respects: 1) it will bring together, in an intensive, place-based workshop format, scholars, writers, analysts and activists working on climate change and in cognate fields, in order to

promote an interdisciplinary conversation about the kinds of stories we need to tell about climate change at the current juncture, specifically including Indigenous experts as part of the conversation about stories and politics; 2) it will involve a longer-term collaboration of workshop participants in order to create a collection of stories, poems and essays that actively connect current research in climate change science and policy with literary approaches to understanding, narrating, reflecting on and responding to a climate-altering and -altered present and future; and 3) it will take elements of this collection to a larger public, where it will serve as the basis of wider conversations about people's responses to the stories and essays in the collection, and as a model for the generation of new stories to ground and orient meaningful personal understandings and actions.

Specifically, *Storying Climate Change* will include three major elements over the course of four years (the final element will extend beyond May 31, 2020):

1. An intensive workshop, including both discussion and place-based activities, in a retreat setting at the Galiano Conservancy Learning Centre (Galiano Island, BC) in which 25 invited participants drawn from the Trudeau community and other sectors (e.g., climate change experts, writers, activists, and elders from the Punc̓'łaxutth' nation whose territory includes Galiano) will come together for a four-day series of conversations and hands-on activities concerning climate change as a process in need of story. Topics of discussion will include: the ways in which literature and the humanities, in conversation with climate science, the social sciences and other fields, may generate more just and equitable imaginations of climate change response; the ways in which stories and poetry may be brought together with policy and politics toward a more imaginative dialogue about narrative, governance, innovation, and resilience; and the ways in which Indigenous communities' current experiences of, preparations for, stories about, and adaptations to climate change already offer us grounded imaginations from which to think on a larger scale.
2. An edited collection of short essays, reflections, poetry and stories, emerging from the workshop, including the voices of all workshop participants, and oriented to a popular audience. These contributions will include experiential, expository, creative, dialogical, traditional and experimental literary forms. They will represent diverse views on and experiences of climate change (including a variety of different forms of expertise), and will also demonstrate the important connections between diverse people's (and peoples') stories about current and future practices and desires, and collective responses enabled by political, policy and community intervention.
3. A series of local "book group" discussions of the collection, to be complemented by a social media site on which selections from the collection will be posted as readings recorded by the authors, in addition to videos of the discussions themselves. The former

will be organized in conjunction with local public libraries and ideally include “star” Trudeau guests from among the authors in the collection who have particular connections to the local community in question; the latter will also include spaces for users to add their own stories, comments and reflections, links to other humanities-based, literary and storytelling sites concerned with climate change, information about the specific communities and grassroots initiatives highlighted in the collection, and other resources for information and action.

The current assemblage of Trudeau Mentors, Fellows and Scholars offers an ideal gathering of minds to enable and implement this project, and the Trudeau Foundation will therefore play a formative role in the organization of the workshop, anthology and book groups. *Storying Climate Change* will invite the participation of Trudeau Mentors and Fellows from at least three sectors: 1) writers of fiction, poetry, literary nonfiction and plays with specific expertise in Indigenous storytelling and/or climate change; 2) prominent thinkers on climate change, biocultural diversity and sustainability, especially as relevant to the Salish Sea; and 3) scholars in the social sciences, humanities and elsewhere with particular expertise in issues of justice, diversity, respectful intercultural communication and public storytelling. Further participation will be invited from other prominent Canadian writers concerned with the complexities of climate, story, and justice, especially from Indigenous perspectives (e.g., Jeannette Armstrong, Warren Cariou, Rosemary Georgeson); from scientists and popular scientists with expertise in climate change and Indigenous environmental justice (e.g., Fikret Berkes, Tim Leduc); from literary critics and environmental humanists specifically interested in climate change narratives, politics and poetics (e.g., Stephanie LeMenager, Imre Szeman); from other prominent scholars and activists engaged in policy, cultural and political work around climate change and social justice (e.g., Melina Laboucan-Massimo, Keith Stewart); and from artist/activist/ scholars whose works already collect and weave together some of these threads (e.g., Marie Clements, Ashlee Cunsolo Willox, Rita Wong). Building on the good relationships already established between the Galiano Conservancy Association and elders from the Pune’laxutth’ Nation, the workshop will centrally include elders and other members of the Pune’laxutth’ community, who will introduce participants to the storied histories and ecologies of the Gulf Islands, to the particular relationships that Pune’laxutth’ and other local First Nations have built with and in the place over the course of approximately 10,000 years (including historical climate changes), to the ongoing social and political climate wrought by settler colonialism that frames and organizes ongoing environmental justice concerns in the region, and thus to the complexities of responding to current ecological issues such as climate change in the context of equally pressing demands for justice, restoration, and recognition.

Also making the Galiano Conservancy Learning Centre an ideal setting for hosting this conversation is the fact that the Conservancy is a community-based organization founded, in 1989, to cultivate on-the-ground practices and public awareness of environmental stewardship, conservation, restoration, and justice. The Learning Centre, established in 2012, includes an off-the-grid education and retreat venue that serves as a model for innovative energy, water, and waste management. The land on which the venue sits encompasses 188 acres and features over two kilometers of waterfront, two seasonal streams, a working farm, wetlands, and over 80 acres of mature forest; the property was logged extensively up until the 1990s, and is currently a site for practical research on ecological restoration as well as an expanding working farm in the process of being turned over to different kinds of permaculture. A key concern of the Conservancy is the impact of climate change on sustainability both at the level of the Learning Centre land and throughout the fragile islands of the Salish Sea: what, in this place, is the future of ecological restoration, community food security, endangered species protection, fire and water management, and economic diversity? How do these issues intersect with growing population pressures in the region, increasing class inequalities, legacies of resource extraction, and ongoing concerns raised by Pune'laxutth' and other First Nations about dispossession and other violences?

Networked with a variety of other community organizations both locally and regionally, including the Galiano Food Program, the Galiano Community School, the Galiano Community Library, the Access to Media Education Society (AMES), the Gulf Islands Film and Television School (GIFTS), and the Restoration of Natural Systems Program at the University of Victoria (in addition to the Pune'laxutth' Nation, as above), the Conservancy serves as a hub for innovative environmental research and education that has, as its primary goal, the exploration and demonstration of possibilities for sustainable, restorative, and socially just community living on land that has sustained serious violence. The Conservancy's Conservation Coordinator, Keith Erickson, has agreed to work with me to develop a program of locally-based conversations and activities about different ecological and social concerns that are especially salient to the Salish Sea in this time of anthropogenic climate change; in addition, other community organizations (such as the Food Program and AMES) have agreed to participate in different parts of the workshop, including everything from meal preparation with locally grown and foraged ingredients to working with local storytellers to facilitate different kinds of cross-cultural conversation between workshop participants and local First Nations. Regionally-based experts in biocultural diversity, Indigenous history and law, writing and storytelling, archaeology, and restorative practice will also be consulted throughout the process of organizing and implementing the project. The workshop, therefore, will be very strongly place-based, but with the idea of encouraging participants to take the intersectional-ecological perspective highlighted by the workshop to their own research and writing.

The Galiano Conservancy workshop will include the following elements:

1. Initial panel presentations by six groups (@ four) of scholars/writers/activists will consider the question of narrating climate change from the perspectives of their fields: a) climate scientists and popular scientists; b) experts in climate policy and politics; c) scholars in environmental humanities and literary criticism concerned with teaching and writing about climate change; d) local climate activists and educators; e) literary writers and storytellers who address climate change and cognate issues in their works; and f) scholars and writers working on intercultural communication and cooperation with Indigenous peoples. First Nations guidance will be specifically solicited for these groups (e.g., Indigenous science, philosophy, storytelling, art, activism), focusing on Pune'laxutth' perspectives but also including others' (such as those of the adjacent Lyackson First Nation and, somewhat more controversially, the Hwlitsum First Nation, who also have a land claim that includes all of Galiano Island).
2. Three days of workshops and other activities will feature these varied experts placed in mixed groups to consider the following questions: a) what is climate change and what does it look like in immediate, sensory terms in different communities (especially on Galiano); b) what are some of the key questions involving mitigation and adaptation at this juncture; c) how are local communities currently responding to climate change; d) what kinds of stories are emerging from these responses, both concretely and imaginatively; e) what role might stories, fiction, and poetry play in assisting imaginative responses; and f) what does the larger public need to learn from communities currently undergoing the effects of climate change as we work toward responses that are not only future-oriented but also environmentally just in the present?
3. One day of field trips to Pune'laxutth' (Kuper) Island, Valdes Island, Dionisio Point, and Montague Harbour will situate larger-scale climate change responses in the context of local First Nations' historical and current climate change mitigations and adaptations, in order both to locate sustainable response in specific communities and to consider the ongoing importance of traditional and other story forms to climate change resilience.
4. Working groups will also be formed to pursue the issues and questions raised by the workshop and to draft an initial sketch of the composition of essays, stories and poems within the *Storying Climate Change* anthology, inclusive of both individual and collaborative contributions.

The overarching goal of the workshop is to create a space in which stories of climate change will be the centre of attention: stories, and especially stories that attend to questions of colonialism, tradition, inequity, injustice, community, language and feeling, will help us envision just and appropriate responses to the current crisis. The subsequent

anthology, *Storying Climate Change*, will thus reflect the conversations enabled by the workshop, and will include the following elements:

1. Workshop participants will be grouped into four writing units, in which one member from each of the six groups noted above will be assigned to each unit.
2. Each member from of the respective unit will write a short work (essay, short fiction, poem, memoir, reflection) that reflects their story of climate change, either providing a story (fictional, personal, poetic) or reflecting on the narrative form and/or poetry of the subject of their concern, including reflections on science, policy and politics.
3. Unit members will comment on the other writings in their unit, creating an ongoing, intimate conversation about climate science, policy, narrative, poetry, story, justice and place. These comments will be incorporated in individual works and collected (by me and a postdoctoral assistant) for inclusion in the volume introduction and conclusion.
4. The ensuing works will be crafted into an anthology, including an explanatory and interpretive introduction (that I will write), a description of the collaborative process, its contribution to existing research, the importance of narrative and poetic form to climate storytelling, and the importance of listening to one another's stories. I will also present the process of creating this anthology as part of a series of lectures and papers on Climate Change Humanities, ideally also including a Trudeau Foundation paper publication.

The collection *Storying Climate Change* will not only build on strong scholarly and practical foundations for thinking about climate change being developed in the arts, humanities and social sciences – and in the experiences, insights, stories and strategies of other communities – but will also uniquely bring together in one easily accessible, interdisciplinary place a range of views that combine reflection with implementation, narrative with analysis, experience with speculation, and poetry with policy. This collection will, then, both illustrate and imagine.

The third component of *Storying Climate Change* will circulate around a series of public conversations about the edited collection. As is apparent in the proliferation of local book clubs and the popularity of such digital sites as Goodreads Groups and Booktalk, stories and literary works are still very much part of public life, and are one of the few places where digital culture seems to enrich, rather than erode, face-to-face conversation (such things as live stream “author chats” blur the boundary between the two). Thus, *Storying Climate Change* will specifically include the following modes of public engagement:

1. A series of community-based, face-to-face discussions about the *Storying Climate Change* collection will be organized in conjunction with local public libraries in major

centres such as Halifax, Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Winnipeg, Edmonton and Vancouver, depending on the proximity and availability of workshop participants, who will be invited to be “star” guests in these forums. Modelled on the Network in Canadian History and Environment (NiCHE) public environmental history talk series, discussions will be introduced and facilitated by me and, as appropriate, by other local members of the Trudeau community and others interested in the project. Other local scholars involved in the environmental humanities and in climate change research, local climate activists, and Indigenous and other writers with an interest in climate politics will be invited to attend and act as agents provocateurs in the audience.

2. An interactive *Storying Climate Change* social media site will be created to feature selected individual stories from the collection as read by workshop participants; these stories will be uploaded prior to publication as a way of generating advance interest in the collection. Post-publication book group discussions may be also filmed and uploaded to the site (they may also be podcasted). Further participation will be solicited from ecocritics and other researchers and community members, who will be asked to post short comments on these discussions and on the stories themselves. The site will also include public forums that will invite readers to engage with the stories (modelled on Goodreads) and to post their own stories in response. Links to other resources, especially those that centre on storytelling, Indigenous perspectives, and climate/ environmental justice, will also be highlighted and disseminated through the site. This component of *Storying Climate Change* will be developed with the assistance of the ALECC Digital Environmental Humanities group.

The proposed project will thus represent an original, interdisciplinary, cross-cultural and multipublic intervention into the transformation of “culture, behaviour, and political participation ... towards sustainability in Canada and beyond” (Trudeau Foundation Conference, 2014).