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Origins, Developments
and Imaginary Futures*

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by Tianyue Zhang



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Book Review

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At its core, *The American Climate Emergency Narrative: Origins, Developments and Imaginary Futures* (2024) interrogates a dominant strand of US culture and frames climate change as an emergency “not for the planet, but for American capitalist modernity” (Höglund 2024, vii). The author, Höglund, argues that many texts commonly categorized as “climate fiction” depict ecological breakdown as a crisis interrupting the lives of middle-class white man, rather than as “the fruits of long history of extractive violence” by taking familiar forms like an influx of migrants, competition for scarce resources or the planet itself becoming a monstrous force (Höglund 2024, viii). Such narrative transforms the attempt to prevent global warming into a form of warfare between a damaged Earth and the institutions designed to uphold capitalist modernity where it will end up either in restored hegemony or in total collapse.

From that diagnosis, Höglund reclassifies climate fictions as “American Climate Emergency Narratives” and traces their history back to the settler colonialism and extractive transformation of Indigenous land. By doing this, the book is foregrounding capitalism as an engine of ecological breakdown and then, reading those crises and emergencies against radical eco-socialist, decolonial, and Indigenous approaches, rather than posthuman or new-materialist alternatives often used in ecocriticism, to get a more direct engagement with the forces that are causing biospheric crisis.

Johan Höglund is based in Sweden at Linnaeus University and he explicitly situates his scholarship within his critical distance from US cultural hegemony, which, as he argues, allows for a clearer perception of American cultural narratives. Across his recent scholarship, Höglund’s stated archive is inter-medial including literature, film,

and games where dominant ideology is rehearsed and contested. His attention to popular culture becomes especially important here, because *The American Climate Emergency Narrative* treats its core idea not as the expression of an isolated author but as something shaped by institutional and economic networks.

The book is genuinely innovative. First, the book's conceptual wording is small, but large in consequence. Höglund shows why calling these works "American Climate Emergency Narratives" rather than simply climate fiction changes the interpretive mode. The conception of "American Climate Emergency Narratives" shifts attention from a generalized climate feeling to a discourse that foregrounds security strategies aimed at adaptation and control, not mitigation. This adjustment redirects scholarship toward how narratives speak from a particular location in the capitalist world-system and how they normalize militarized responses (Höglund 2024, 20). Equally compelling is the book's historical depth. Höglund's insistence that contemporary emergency narratives are continuous since the colonial period unsettles the assumptions about climate change as a recent or unprecedented phenomenon (Höglund 2024, vii-ix). Finally, the book expands the archive in a way that matters for the argument by mapping a fuller range of texts, especially ones climate-fiction criticism tends to ignore for being less serious (Bould 2021, 4), while keeping the analysis anchored in political and capitalist modernity. This combination lets the book show a recurring paradox that capitalist modernity is recognized both as a part of the problem and as the only tangible solution.

Höglund's Introduction is not a neutral doorway but is already an argument about where "climate emergency" is being narrated from and what that location makes possible. He situates the project within a world-systems/world-ecology lens (Höglund 2024, 7), arguing that the capitalist core both drives extractive imperatives and is the necessary starting point where attempts to prevent breakdown must begin (Höglund 2024, 18). In the same gesture, he clarifies why "American Climate Emergency Narratives" cannot be approached as merely imaginative projections, that these narratives often arise with, and speak for, a world ecology based on commodity, and that they tend to translate systemic crisis into governance problems that capitalism can supposedly manage (Höglund 2024, 9). This setting matters because it sets up the book's recurring gist that when crisis is defined as an emergency for capitalist modernity, the default solution becomes restoration and adaptation rather than

structural change (Höglund 2024, 21).

Höglund's first movement (Chapter 2, Chapter 3, and the first half of Chapter 4) examines texts from the early seventeenth century through the late twentieth century including historical accounts, plays, novels, and Hollywood films that do not merely describe but actively participate in the making of America as the hegemon of the world system, laying the imaginative groundwork for contemporary emergency storytelling (Höglund 2024, 21-22). The key claim of these chapters is that these origin stories register and help normalize the extractive relationship between land and people that enabled the capitalist word-ecology.

Chapter 2 (Settler Capitalist Frontiers), as Höglund summarizes, gives a genealogy of the diagnosis laid out in the Introduction, and moves through two historical narrative stages, the first of which is the settler colonial texts that narrate ecology as an “emergency-inducing space” (Höglund 2024, 22) requiring violent confrontation, and the second of which is white pro-slavery and abolitionist novels that recognize the plantation and slavery as central to the US economy while also viewing them as drivers of environmental breakdown. The connective tissues between these stages is not simply violence, but the logic that when crises are framed as threats to the settler-capitalists, the solutions become intensified control over land, labor, and mobility in the name of order. This backward glance is doing forward-looking work that explains why later emergency narratives can be obsessed with ownership, privilege, and violence, and it tells us to read later climate crises not as ruptures from the colonial past but as intensification of a long tradition in the service of expansion (Höglund 2024, 161).

From this colonial base, Chapter 3 (Fossil Fictions) then shifts the genealogy into energy regimes that accelerate capitalist expansion. Höglund connects the rise of fossil capitalism to an expanded capacity to settle, colonize, and extract, emphasizing that fossil energy didn't just empower capitalism but amplified its pace. He further argues that ecological breakdown becomes legible primarily as a threat to core continuity, to the supply lines and security apparatuses that keep capitalist modernity functioning (Höglund 2024, 52).

Chapter 4 (The Irradiated) completes this first movement by reading post-WWII American fiction that features the enormous but “cheap” violence enabled by nuclear weapons. These narratives imagine futures where climate has broken down due to

nuclear war and the capitalist world-system is crumbling; in some, the damaged planet itself becomes a monstrous threat demanding military attention. Höglund points out that such stories mark the formal beginning of the fully formed “American Climate Emergency Narrative” because they train the readers to experience climate breakdown as a battlefield where militarized response is the only posture and this assumption sets a bridge to the book’s second movement.

Having established the historical scaffolding, Höglund turns to texts produced after the millennium, when biospheric crisis is increasingly undeniable and the US is beginning to lose hegemonic control of the world-system. The second movement includes Chapters 5–7, where emergency narratives become more about national security problems that are supposedly to be solved through military expansion.

Chapter 5 (Geopolitics) studies narratives in which climate breakdown generates international tension and conflict and major countries including the US, China, India, and Russia compete for resources, gaining or losing hegemony in the process. This chapter becomes especially persuasive when it turns to games where the militarized imagination becomes concrete. In Höglund’s reading of war games like *Battlefield 2042*, he notes how the game’s logic refuses to imagine any solution besides war (Höglund 2024, 120). Players are not just seeing wars, they are practicing them, which develops reflexes and muscle memories that naturalize military responses as the default mode thus forming a “Military Entertainment Complex” (Lenoir and Caldwell 2018). Here, the book’s critique of emergency narrative is that emergency is rehearsed and enjoyed as a repertoire of reactions that promise preservation of the existing order (Höglund 2024, 120).

Chapter 6 (The Displaced) and Chapter 7 (Ruins) then show what this security imagination does when the “threat” is not a monster or a rival state, but displaced people and the loss of core comforts. Chapter 6 follows climate refugees at borders and shows how some narratives allegorize the refugees as border-scaling monsters (Höglund 2024, 23). The implication is sharp: climate emergency storytelling repeatedly turns the systemic violence of extraction into a crisis of border management and demographic anxiety, thereby relocating the moral center of suffering to those with the most to lose in the core (Höglund 2024, 23). Chapter 7 extends this by asking what happens when capitalism’s infrastructures and standing armies are gone. Höglund argues that many post-apocalyptic narratives do not abandon militarized capitalist

paradigms, instead they keep “rehearsing the violent practices” that once elevated the US within the world-system, turning violence into something like a ritual celebration of borders and property rather than a meaningful ecological response (Höglund 2024, 161). Here, Höglund’s use of Fisher’s “capitalist realism” (Fisher 2009) is pivotal: even in worlds where capitalism is materially void, the narrative often cannot imagine a social order not premised on capitalist relationality, so it repeats the same scenario, “a single trick over and over again” (Höglund 2024, 177), to distract from other possible stories.

Höglund then makes a striking methodological admission: the book’s repeated description of hegemonic ideology risks naturalizing it (Höglund 2024, 24). To resist that effect, the final chapter (Fallout Futures) deliberately breaks this repetition by treating the American Climate Emergency Narrative as a kind of cultural fallout that makes capitalist world-ecology the only possible world to manage this emergency, which is similar to that done by conspiracy theory in *The Department of Truth* (Höglund 2024, 182). The chapter therefore turns to four interconnected counter-narrative types including multispecies/Chthulucene texts, Indigenous climate novels, Black climate narratives, and explicitly anti-capitalist climate texts proposing political alternatives (Höglund 2024, 185). In the final pages of the book, Höglund reinstates the core of his idea that if the dominant emergency form binds agency to capitalist restoration, then the ethical task is to cultivate narratives that can name restitution, reparations, restoration, and revolution as more than rhetorical gestures (Holleman 2018, 162).

In conclusion, the book’s discussion from settler frontiers to fossil acceleration, from irradiated monsters to gamed geopolitics, from borders to ruins, and finally to counter-futures, reads as a sustained effort to show how “emergency” has been weaponized to secure modernity, and how criticism might help disarm it by widening the field of futurity beyond capitalist realism (Höglund 2024, 203).

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