

“Westbound” Creative Thesis Reflection

For my honors thesis, I decided to explore effective climate messaging by creating a piece of climate fiction that aims to overcome each of Per Espen Stoknes’ five barriers to act on climate change. Climate fiction is a subgenre of science fiction with no recognized origin that gained popularity in the 1990s and 2010s. Literature in this subgenre is often post-apocalyptic and paints a cautionary picture of the future under anthropogenic climate change if we continue in our current direction. My thesis, *Westbound*, is a 38,000 word novella that began as a short story about a conversation between my aunt, uncle, and father.

My family was visiting Olympia, Washington a few years ago when my uncle asked my dad, a green architect, to design an underground bunker inside of a shipping container for him. My dad didn’t want to be involved with the project, as it struck him as a paranoid and convoluted endeavor. My aunt explained that they didn’t want the bunker to escape nuclear war or a biblical day of reckoning, but rather as a place to ride out severe storms. Rural Washington had already seen an increase in the frequency and severity of flooding and torrential rain as a result of climate change, an upward trend that is expected to continue. She just wanted a water resistant place to take valuable belongings and themselves in the event that severe weather destroyed their home.

Climate change isn’t expected to cause a worldwide flood, drought, or any other *The Day After Tomorrow*-style armageddon in my lifetime. However, overhearing this conversation made me realize that individuals and communities will face their own personal apocalypses in the near future as the effects of climate change reach their corners of the world. As we have witnessed throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the end of life as we know it can be both swift and devastating. I decided to tell a story about a mother and daughter taking a road trip with a focus on the projected impacts of climate change in a handful of the United States in order to bring the issue home to a variety of readers. The following paragraphs discuss the narrative of my thesis, including its ending.

As I developed my story, characters, and setting, I considered ways in which I could address Stoknes' five barriers to act on climate change: distance, doom, dissonance, denial, and iDentity. Distance is a barrier because people perceive climate change as far away both physically and in time, and therefore brush off climate messaging as non-emergent. In order to address this barrier, I set my novella in 2037 and made references throughout it to current popular culture. In the same way 60s, 70s, 80s, and 90s media are still referenced and well known to teenagers today, the celebrities of the 2020s will be familiar to those born during this decade. I felt that creating new slang and media to reference, as Anthony Burgess did in *A Clockwork Orange*, would make my story feel unfamiliar and distant to contemporary readers.

The doom barrier refers to the apocalypse fatigue that people develop when exposed to doomsday predictions for too long. When we watch enough movies and hear enough news revolving around scorched earth climate projections, we see climate change as an inevitable and insurmountable nightmare. My piece does instill a sense of doom through its adherence to business as usual climate models, so I used two vignettes to encourage readers that a brighter future is possible under better environmental policies. The characters visit London, Ontario, discovering that the city has made many changes to reduce carbon emissions and heal their local ecosystem. There is also an afterword featuring an alternate, happy ending for my main characters. In this afterward, my main character is able to fulfill her childhood dreams of becoming a marine biologist and works to track the decline of ocean acidification as a result of emissions reduction in the United States.

Dissonance occurs when people fail to associate their own behaviors with climate impact. I am less concerned with individual actions, such as water use and recycling, and more interested with motivating people to make consumer and voting decisions that reflect the world they wish to live in. Ultimately, industry and government are the antagonists when it comes to climate change, and both entities are experts in twisting this narrative. In my novella, I feature a 'progressive' president who has made only performative commitments to climate change

mitigation and is funded by the very companies responsible for the climate crisis my characters are experiencing. I hope to highlight the insidious nature of performative activism and the importance of holding our leaders accountable when it comes to climate change mitigation.

Denial is a defense mechanism that activates when people feel that they are being criticized or asked to change by climate activists. It is easier to mock and cast aside climate messaging, especially facts and calls to action, than to accept responsibility for the planet and participate in climate solutions. I made an effort during my writing process not to fill my narrative with guilt and shame. Although the actions of my generation and those before us will decide the fate of my main character's generation, there are larger forces at play. I'm not asking readers to abandon meat or cancel their air travel, I'm asking them to rally for a future where the negative impacts of factory farms and commercial airlines on the planet are regulated. The characters in my story come from different walks of life, but they are not divided on climate change.

This brings me to iDentity, the final barrier to climate action. All of the information we absorb is filtered through our cultural, professional, and personal contexts. We often reject information coming from people we consider different from or against us. For instance, a conservative audience member is likely to tune out a message coming from an openly liberal speaker, even on a nonpartisan topic. Climate change has been deliberately construed as a partisan issue in order to increase barriers to act. To overcome the iDentity barrier, I tried to include characters within my story who have differing political views and different personal calls to action when it comes to climate change. I created a narrative where all of my characters share a common enemy and are united in the struggle of surviving a climate crisis.

Though my novella does fit the post-apocalyptic, doom and gloom mold of the climate fiction before it, I wrote it with a larger story in mind. If I were to continue working within the *Westbound* universe, I would write a sequel featuring my main characters attempting to rebuild civilization outside of the walls of the now significantly smaller United States. This sequel would include themes of unity, rewilding, and resistance against fascism and corporate greed.

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