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Analytical review of contemporary speculative literature: Foresighting the future of health, energy, and economics within strategic pillars and the 2030 SDG framework

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that contemporary speculative literature operates as a mode of cultural foresight through which writers test, complicate, and ethically evaluate possible futures of health, energy, and economics. Rather than treating speculative fiction as a crude predictive machine, I read it as a literary practice of scenario-making that reveals hidden interdependencies between bodily vulnerability, infrastructural power, and political economy. Situated at the intersection of English literary studies, speculative fiction studies, ecocriticism, medical humanities, energy humanities, and sustainability discourse, the essay examines how narrative form, temporality, metaphor, and world-building render the future thinkable at human scale while keeping structural forces in view. The discussion proceeds through three major clusters. First, it reads pandemic, biotechnological, and biopolitical narratives to show that speculative literature imagines health not merely as a medical condition but as a question of care, access, reproductive justice, disability, and institutional trust. Second, it turns to climate crisis, fossil-fuel dependence, extractivism, water stress, and renewable imaginaries to show how speculative texts make energy legible as culture, conflict, and planetary infrastructure. Third, it examines labor, automation, inequality, scarcity, and post-growth possibilities to demonstrate that the genre persistently turns economic abstraction into lived experience. Throughout, the article connects these literary futures to the strategic logics of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDGs 3, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, and 13. I conclude that contemporary speculative literature does not deliver policy blueprints, but it performs an equally important task: it trains ethical attention, widens political imagination, and offers narrative laboratories for more just and sustainable futures.

KEYWORDS: speculative literature, cultural foresight, ecocriticism, medical humanities, energy humanities, political economy, critical dystopia, Sustainable Development Goals

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1. Introduction

Few literary forms have proven as capable as contemporary speculative literature of holding together the crises that define the early twenty-first century. Pandemic anxiety, ecological collapse, infrastructural fragility, automation, debt, platform labor, mass displacement, and the exhaustion of growth-driven imaginaries do not arrive separately in lived experience, and they rarely arrive separately in speculative fiction. In novel after novel, the future is staged not as a distant abstraction but as a pressure field in which health systems, energy regimes, and economic orders converge. This convergence explains why speculative literature now matters with renewed urgency to English literary studies. It gives shape to what publics sense before institutions are willing to name: that vulnerability is systemic, that technological promise is inseparable from distributive conflict, and that the future is experienced unevenly.

To call speculative literature a mode of foresight is not to mistake it for prediction. The most valuable speculative texts are rarely those that "get the future right" in a literal sense. Their power lies elsewhere. They defamiliarize inherited habits of thought; they convert abstract systems into narrative situations; they reveal the ethical assumptions embedded in apparently technical decisions; and they dramatize what happens when health, energy, and economics are imagined as separate spheres rather than as mutually constitutive conditions of collective life. In this sense, speculative fiction performs what might be called cultural foresight: it does not forecast the future so much as model the consequences of present structures under intensified conditions (Jameson, 1982; Cameron, 2015; De Smedt & De Cruz, 2015). The future, in these texts, becomes an instrument for reading the present more sharply.

This article examines a wide field of contemporary speculative literature in English through that lens. It argues that speculative literature functions as a literary laboratory in which writers stress-test future scenarios of bodily survival, ecological transition, and economic organization. The genre's world-building strategies make it possible to think across scales, from intimate care to planetary systems; its temporal dislocations make latent crises narratively available; and its metaphors expose the moral cost of policies that otherwise present themselves as neutral or inevitable. While many recent studies have addressed climate fiction, dystopia, medical humanities, or energy humanities in isolation, there remains a need for an integrated literary account of how these domains intersect around the linked questions of health, energy, and economics, especially when read alongside the normative horizon of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

The title's reference to "strategic pillars" is therefore important. The 2030 Agenda is conventionally articulated through the linked principles of people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership, and it insists that sustainable development must be understood as an interdependent field rather than a list of detachable objectives. In literary terms, this means that the future of public health cannot be separated from energy access, environmental stability, labor conditions, infrastructural design, or inequalities of class, race, gender, region, and species. Contemporary speculative fiction repeatedly confirms this interdependence. It does so not by producing policy tables, but by narrating thresholds: the moment when healthcare is privatized beyond recognition, when fossil modernity reveals its lethal afterlife, when work becomes algorithmic compulsion, or when common life is rebuilt through mutual aid and reduced consumption.

My approach is deliberately literary. Although this essay speaks to sustainability discourse, its center of gravity remains English literary studies. I attend to narrative form, world-building, metaphor, temporality, focalization, and the politics of imagination. Representative texts discussed include Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and related MaddAddam novels, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and *Klara and the Sun*, Ling Ma's *Severance*, Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*, Chang-rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea*, Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife*, Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* and *The Ministry for the Future*, Octavia Butler's *Parable* novels, and Cory Doctorow's *Walkaway*. These works differ in tone, politics, and aesthetic strategy, yet they share a commitment to turning the future into a site of interpretive contest. They ask not simply what might happen, but who pays, who survives, whose labor is counted, whose bodies are protected, and which forms of life are treated as disposable.

The argument proceeds in five movements. After reviewing the relevant scholarship and clarifying the essay's theoretical framework, I examine health futures in contemporary speculative literature, paying special attention to pandemic, biotechnology, care, disability, and biopolitics. I then turn to energy, where speculative texts illuminate fossil dependence, extractivism, climate crisis, water precarity, and renewable imaginaries.

The third analytical section considers economics, labor, automation, inequality, and post-growth possibility. A penultimate section relates these findings to the strategic logics of the 2030 SDG framework, especially SDGs 3, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, and 13. I conclude that speculative literature is one of the most powerful cultural forms available for thinking sustainable futures because it refuses the false comfort of disciplinary separation. It reminds readers that health is infrastructural, energy is political, and economy is narrative before it is numerical.

2. Review of Scholarship

Recent scholarship has made it increasingly difficult to treat speculative literature as a minor or escapist archive. Philosophical discussions of speculative fiction have emphasized its epistemic and heuristic value, arguing that imagined worlds can function as rigorous thought experiments rather than mere entertainment (Cameron, 2015; De Smedt & De Cruz, 2015). This line of inquiry complements a longer critical tradition in science fiction and utopian studies that reads speculative narrative as a method of cognitive estrangement and social diagnosis. Jameson's enduring question—whether we can imagine the future at all—remains central, not because speculative fiction answers it conclusively, but because it keeps the blockage of political imagination in view (Jameson, 1982). Tom Moylan's work on the critical dystopia and Ruth Levitas's account of "utopia as method" are especially important here: both insist that future-oriented writing can simultaneously negate present arrangements and open provisional spaces for alternative social thinking (Moylan, 2018a, 2018b; Levitas, 2013a, 2013b).

Contemporary literary theory has also expanded the conceptual vocabulary available for reading speculative texts. Haraway's work on speculative fabulation, kin-making, and staying with damaged worlds has encouraged critics to move beyond binary oppositions between optimism and despair, apocalypse and redemption, human and nonhuman (Haraway, 2013, 2015, 2016). Vint's account of biopolitical futures adds a crucial analytic of governance, population management, and bodily value to twenty-first-century speculative fiction, while Stableford's earlier reflections on biotechnology and utopia remain newly relevant in an era of genomic capitalism and platformized health (Stableford, 2000; Vint, 2021). Even discussions that revisit Darko Suvin indirectly continue to matter, because the idea that speculative narrative estranges readers from the present remains one of the genre's most durable critical tools (Nodelman, 2009).

Within ecocriticism and climate fiction studies, the field has matured rapidly. Marland's overview of ecocriticism maps the broad transition from a nature-centered criticism to more complex engagements with culture, environment, and material interdependence (Marland, 2013). Johns-Putra has shown how climate change criticism widened literary studies beyond an earlier, narrower ecocritical frame, while Schneider-Mayerson's empirical work on climate-fiction readers provides rare evidence about literature's capacity to affect ecological consciousness (Johns-Putra, 2016; Schneider-Mayerson, 2018). Crownshaw's work on speculative memory and the planetary expands the temporal horizon of genre analysis, reminding us that climate futures are also struggles over archives, memory, and historical responsibility (Crownshaw, 2017). More recent scholarship has explored climate fiction's pedagogical, affective, and formal dimensions, from Mackenthun's emphasis on "sustainable stories" and transition narratives to Sarıkaya-Şen's account of eco-feminist critical dystopia (Mackenthun, 2021; Sarıkaya-Şen, 2023). Studies of utopian and dystopian imagination in environmental education and climate discourse likewise underscore that future scenarios are never neutral cognitive objects; they are normative and affective devices that shape action or paralysis (Ott, 2023).

The environmental humanities have provided an even wider conceptual setting for such work. Castree, Rose and collaborators, van Dooren and Rose, and others have argued that contemporary crises require new narrative forms capable of registering multispecies entanglement, damaged environments, and the limits of human exceptionalism (Castree, 2014; Rose et al., 2012; van Dooren & Rose, 2016). Essays collected around Anthropocene discourse have emphasized not only environmental degradation but also scale, colonial violence, sensory experience, labor, and infrastructure (Castellano, 2018; Skrimshire, 2018; Otter, 2025; Rodríguez Freire, 2025). For literary criticism, this matters because speculative fiction frequently operates where these discussions meet: it narrates planetary crisis through embodied, localized, and affectively charged situations.

Parallel developments in the medical humanities have illuminated another dimension of contemporary speculative writing. Miller and McFarlane's foundational intervention on science fiction and the medical humanities demonstrated that speculative narrative can stage bioethical dilemmas, prosthetic futures, care

relations, and medicalized social control with singular force (Miller & McFarlane, 2016). Subsequent work has widened the field: Strachan connects design fiction to medical humanities; Wald links cognitive estrangement to medical ethics; Kendal shows how speculative narrative can enrich feminist bioethics; De Matas and Doherty and Giordano explore how science fiction and pandemic fiction help public health reason through crisis; and Milner offers a useful typology of pandemic narratives (Strachan, 2016; Wald, 2008; Kendal, 2022; De Matas, 2022; Doherty & Giordano, 2020; Milner, 2022). Barrish's reading of *On Such a Full Sea* is particularly important for the present essay because it explicitly connects speculative fiction to the political economy of healthcare, showing how literary texts dramatize stratified health systems rather than merely biomedical scenarios (Barrish, 2019). Work on disability, reproduction, and biocolonialism has further sharpened literary analysis by foregrounding the bodies that future-oriented discourse often marginalizes (Kemball, 2022; Murray, 2022).

The energy humanities have likewise become indispensable. Scholars such as Szeman, Goodbody and Smith, Fahy, and Mukherjee have argued that energy is not merely a technical resource but a cultural form that structures feeling, narrative, and political possibility (Szeman, 2013, 2017; Goodbody & Smith, 2019; Fahy, 2020; Mukherjee, 2021). Petrofiction criticism has made visible the ways literature narrates extraction, fossil modernity, and the uneven geographies of oil dependence (Macdonald, 2017; Hiday, 2021). Research on energy narratives and climate storytelling in the social sciences complements this work by showing how stories mediate public understanding of energy transition, decarbonization, and technological futures (Brown, 2017; Bushell et al., 2017; Hermwille, 2016; Harris, 2017; Asayama & Ishii, 2017). More recent work on sustainability-transition narratives and imagined futures further demonstrates that transition is always partly a narrative problem: societies cannot move toward different infrastructures without first rendering those futures imaginable (Stefani et al., 2022; Friedrich & Hendriks, 2024; Garduño García & Gaziulusoy, 2021).

A final strand of scholarship concerns political economy, labor, and post-growth futures. Here the conversation is divided between literary-cultural analysis and social-scientific work on platforms, automation, and degrowth. Banks's discussion of post-growth cultural economies and Kallis and colleagues' account of wellbeing within planetary boundaries are especially relevant because they refuse the assumption that economic vitality must remain synonymous with endless expansion (Banks, 2022; Kallis et al., 2025). Albert's work on growth hegemony, alongside research on the gig economy and algorithmic management, helps clarify the real-world backdrop against which recent speculative fiction imagines work, exhaustion, and disposability (Albert, 2024; Lehdonvirta, 2018; Jarrahi et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2019). Yet literary criticism has not always integrated these discussions with climate and health frameworks, nor has sustainability scholarship consistently engaged literary form as more than illustration.

This article addresses that gap. It builds on the achievements of ecocriticism, medical humanities, energy humanities, dystopia studies, and sustainability research, but it does not treat them as parallel tracks. Instead, it asks what becomes visible when contemporary speculative literature is read as a field where these tracks repeatedly cross. The premise is simple: the future of health is impossible to understand without energy and economics; the future of energy cannot be grasped without health and justice; and the future of economy is narratively unstable unless ecological limits and bodily vulnerability are placed at the center.

3. Theoretical Framework: Speculative Literature as Cultural Foresight

The theoretical claim of this essay is that speculative literature functions as cultural foresight. By this I mean a literary practice that does not forecast events in a narrow, technocratic sense, but rather models relational consequences, ethical thresholds, and structures of feeling that conventional policy discourse cannot easily represent. Foresight, in this account, is interpretive rather than predictive. It emerges from form: from the arrangement of temporalities, the pressure of metaphor, the selection of narrative viewpoint, the texture of world-building, and the social logic of imagined institutions.

This definition draws on several overlapping traditions. From science fiction theory, it takes the insight that estrangement enables cognition. The speculative text makes the present legible by displacing it, whether into altered futures, parallel institutions, or intensified versions of current tendencies (Jameson, 1982; Nodelman, 2009). From utopian studies, it borrows the principle that imagining otherwise is not decorative but methodological. Levitas's "imaginary reconstitution of society" is particularly useful because it frames utopia

not as naïve perfection but as an analytic instrument for reconstructing the social totality from a different angle (Levitas, 2013a). From dystopia studies, it adopts Moylan's recognition that contemporary dystopias often remain "critical": they diagnose the present harshly, yet they preserve traces of resistance, solidarity, or institutional reinvention (Moylan, 2018b). From Haraway, it inherits suspicion toward heroic escape narratives and an insistence on staying with damaged worlds, compromised inheritances, and multispecies entanglement (Haraway, 2016).

Cultural foresight also depends on how speculative literature manages scale. Health, energy, and economics all exceed ordinary perception. One cannot directly "see" a public-health system, a fossil-fuel regime, or a global labor platform in the way one sees a room or a face. Literature compensates for that opacity by converting systems into scenes, routines, infrastructures, and bodies. A quarantine checkpoint, a clinic queue, a labor contract, a power outage, a water ration, a flooded subway, a cloned organ donor, an algorithmic manager—these are narrative condensations of larger social arrangements. The speculative mode intensifies this work by putting such arrangements under pressure. It shows not only what a system is, but what it becomes when stretched toward breakdown or transformation.

A second advantage of speculative literature is temporal complexity. In policy writing, the future is often flattened into a target year, a scenario range, or a curve. Fiction is less tidy. It can juxtapose slow violence with sudden shock, private memory with institutional time, and catastrophe with the ordinary duration of care. This is one reason speculative texts are especially powerful for thinking sustainability. They capture how crises arrive unevenly and how people inhabit long emergencies before those emergencies receive official names. The future in these works is seldom pure futurity. It is thick with residues, recurring structures, and unfinished histories.
Methodologically, then, this essay combines analytical review with selective close reading. I do not seek an exhaustive taxonomy of speculative subgenres. Instead, I identify recurrent literary strategies through which texts imagine the future of health, energy, and economics: pandemic and biopolitical narration; infrastructural and climate world-building; and depictions of labor, debt, scarcity, and commoning. The point is not to make literature answer policy questions directly. It is to show that literary form itself produces knowledge about sustainable futures—knowledge that is affective, ethical, relational, and often resistant to the simplifications of managerial discourse. If the SDGs provide a normative vocabulary for interdependence, speculative literature provides an imaginative medium through which the difficulty of that interdependence can be felt and thought.

4. Health Futures: Pandemic, Biotechnology, Care, and Biopolitics

Contemporary speculative literature repeatedly insists that health is not a self-contained medical domain. It is a social infrastructure, a political calculus, a labor regime, and a moral language through which value is distributed. That is why recent speculative narratives of disease and biotechnology matter so much. They do not merely imagine catastrophic pathogens or futuristic medicine; they ask who has the right to care, whose body counts as repairable, and what forms of violence become normalized when survival is privatized.

Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* offers one of the clearest examples. Its pandemic is not a blind act of nature but a product of corporate biotechnological design. The novel's logic is biopolitical to the core: life is engineered, optimized, commodified, and finally reset. The compounds promise security and medical innovation, yet their insulated order depends upon external disposability and the instrumental treatment of human and nonhuman life alike. Atwood's achievement lies not simply in imagining a plague, but in exposing the ideological environment that makes such a plague plausible. Health becomes inseparable from the profit motive, and scientific ingenuity loses any ethical horizon beyond market power. That conjunction between biomedical capacity and social irresponsibility has made the MaddAddam world enduringly legible to readers of the post-pandemic present (Miller & McFarlane, 2016; De Matas, 2022).

Ling Ma's *Severance* turns to a different but related problem. The Shen Fever that structures the novel is memorable not because it generates spectacular mutations, but because it literalizes repetition. The afflicted continue to perform routines—setting tables, folding clothes, returning to offices—until those gestures become empty loops. The conceit is brilliant because it makes visible the everyday automation of late-capitalist subjectivity. The disease is biological, but its cultural meaning is economic. Even before social collapse, Candace's work life is already organized around exhaustion, brand maintenance, and affective detachment. The pandemic does not introduce alien discipline; it reveals how deeply routine labor has already colonized the body. This is

why *Severance* belongs as much to the political economy of health as to pandemic fiction proper. It suggests that a society unable to distinguish survival from productivity is already unwell. Milner's typology of pandemic fiction and Doherty and Giordano's reflections on what pandemic fiction enables are useful here, but Ma's novel pushes the matter further by showing how contagion and labor discipline become formally inseparable (Milner, 2022; Doherty & Giordano, 2020).

Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* offers an important counterpoint. The novel's post-pandemic world is undeniably devastated, yet its narrative energy does not remain fixed on collapse. Instead, it turns toward care, memory, art, and the difficult work of reconstituting social bonds. The Traveling Symphony's motto—"survival is insufficient"—is not a sentimental correction to catastrophe; it is a redefinition of health. Human flourishing cannot be reduced to continued biological existence. Art, education, trust, and communal ritual are also conditions of collective wellbeing. In medical-humanities terms, *Station Eleven* enlarges the field from disease response to the cultural forms that make life habitable after trauma. Health here is relational, aesthetic, and communal, not simply therapeutic.

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* moves the discussion from pandemic to biotechnology, and in doing so it exposes a different fantasy of health: the fantasy that social suffering can be displaced onto bodies designated for sacrifice. The clones exist to preserve the lives of others, and the full horror of the novel lies in its administrative normalcy. There is little melodramatic villainy. Instead, there is institutionalized politeness, pedagogical management, and a culture that knows how to benefit from exploitation without allowing itself to name it. The novel's restrained style is crucial. Its emotional force comes from delayed recognition, muted dread, and the slow realization that personhood has been granted only to the extent that it does not interfere with extractive medical utility. Wald's claim that science-fictional estrangement can sharpen ethical perception is exemplified here: the speculative premise forces readers to confront how health systems become unjust when they convert some lives into reserves for others (Wald, 2008). Ishiguro's later *Klara and the Sun* extends this problem into the domains of automation and care. The novel is not about healthcare in a narrow sense, yet it is deeply concerned with therapeutic substitution, enhancement, and the emotional outsourcing of vulnerability. Klara's labor of attention asks whether future care economies will dignify relational labor or merely automate its appearance.

Chang-rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* makes the political economy of health explicit. Its stratified world organizes population through labor, enclosure, and differential access to security. Barrish has shown persuasively that the novel links healthcare to class structure rather than treating disease as a universal condition (Barrish, 2019). What is striking from a literary perspective is how Lee's collective narration complicates individualist models of survival. The first-person plural voice refuses the neoliberal fantasy that one person's resilience can substitute for structural justice. The novel's health order is ecological as well as clinical: toxicity, food systems, controlled zones, and work regimes all condition what counts as a viable life. In this sense, the text offers a sharp literary correlative to SDG 3's emphasis on health and wellbeing and SDG 10's concern with reduced inequalities. It suggests that any account of "good health" detached from environmental and economic distribution remains fatally incomplete.

Recent medical-humanities scholarship helps clarify why reproductive futures and disability are equally central to speculative health narratives. Anna Kemball's reading of Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* foregrounds biocolonialism, reproductive control, and the racialized policing of pregnant bodies under crisis conditions (Kemball, 2022). Stuart Murray's work on disability embodiment in speculative fiction likewise demonstrates that post-crisis futures often function as "testbeds" for deciding which bodies are deemed productive, resilient, or burdensome (Murray, 2022). Such studies matter because the future-oriented rhetoric of resilience can quietly reproduce exclusion. Speculative literature frequently stages this danger with uncomfortable clarity. It shows how emergency discourse legitimates surveillance, confinement, and triage, especially for those already marked by disability, poverty, or racial difference.

What emerges across these texts is a redefinition of health itself. In speculative literature, health is never simply the absence of disease. It is a contested arrangement of care, infrastructure, labor, embodiment, and recognition. Pandemic fiction reveals the fragility of public trust; biotechnology narratives expose sacrificial logics within therapeutic systems; reproductive and disability-centered texts challenge the normate body assumed by futurist discourse; and post-collapse narratives ask what forms of common life make survival

worth sustaining. That is why speculative literature is so useful to the critical medical humanities. It refuses to let medicine imagine itself outside politics. The future of health, these texts insist, is also the future of ethics, economy, and social form.

5. Energy Futures: Climate Crisis, Fossil Dependence, and Renewable Imaginaries

If health-centered speculative fiction reveals the body as a site of governance, energy-centered speculative fiction reveals infrastructure as culture. One of the key insights of the energy humanities is that energy regimes tend to disappear from ordinary consciousness precisely when they are functioning. Electricity arrives; water flows; fuel is purchased; logistics operate; and the material basis of social life becomes background. Literature can reverse that invisibility. It can render the energy system perceptible by narrating its breakdown, tracing its uneven benefits, or imagining its transformation (Szeman, 2013, 2017; Goodbody & Smith, 2019; Fahy, 2020). Contemporary speculative fiction does this with exceptional force.

Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife* is a crucial case. Though ostensibly organized around water scarcity in the American Southwest, the novel is fundamentally about energy, extraction, and infrastructure. Water in the book is not a neutral natural resource; it is an instrument of power, securitized and unevenly distributed. The novel's hard-edged thriller form matters because it converts hydrological and regulatory structures into urgency, danger, and violence. Climate change is not represented as a distant planetary abstraction but as a regime of privatized scarcity enforced through contracts, walls, and armed intermediaries. The future imagined here is not one in which technology simply fails; it is one in which existing inequalities determine who gets to adapt. This is why environmental justice remains essential to reading speculative climate fiction: the burdens of transition and collapse are never shared equally (Mohai et al., 2009).

Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* similarly transform infrastructural decline into everyday lived precarity. Fire, water shortage, gated compounds, corporate privatization, and mass displacement are not scenic details. They are the material grammar of a social order that has abandoned public provision. Butler's great achievement is to show how climate, economics, and governance braid together before the term "climate fiction" had consolidated as a category. The ecological conditions of the novels are inseparable from labor insecurity, racial violence, and the collapse of democratic reciprocity. The result is not a simple apocalypse but what Mackenthun describes as a transition narrative under pressure: a painful passage in which survival depends upon forms of collective improvisation that dominant institutions can no longer provide (Mackenthun, 2021). Butler's fictional 2020s feel so urgent not because they predict exact events, but because they grasp the structural intimacy between ecological crisis and social abandonment.

Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* and *The Ministry for the Future* offer a different energy imaginary. Robinson does not romanticize disaster, but he resists the idea that climate fiction must culminate in terminal collapse. In *New York 2140*, the flooded city becomes a site where finance, infrastructure, mutual aid, and inequality intersect. Rising seas do not erase capitalism; they intensify its speculative instincts. The novel's polyphonic structure is especially important. By distributing voice across brokers, activists, engineers, and ordinary residents, it dramatizes climate adaptation as a conflict over institutions rather than as a purely technological challenge. *The Ministry for the Future* extends that institutional imagination further, adopting a documentary and multivocal form that moves between testimony, policy speculation, ecological horror, and practical invention. For some readers, Robinson's procedural detail edges toward didacticism. Yet literarily, the wager is significant: the future of energy transition can be narrated not only through catastrophe but through the friction of governance, law, finance, and public will. Renewable energy, in this framework, is not a gadget but a reorganization of value and collective time.

The energy humanities help clarify why this matters. Szeman has argued that energy systems generate not only economic arrangements but epistemologies—ways of knowing and not knowing the world (Szeman, 2013). Petrofiction criticism, meanwhile, has shown how literature registers the peculiar abstraction of oil modernity, its mobility, violence, and mystified infrastructures (Macdonald, 2017; Hiday, 2021). Speculative fiction intensifies these insights by projecting fossil dependence into stressed futures where extraction can no longer disguise its costs. The genre makes energy visible precisely by narrating its social consequences: polluted zones, transport breakdowns, drowned coasts, militarized resources, and the exhaustion of carbon-intensive habits. Mukherjee's call for an "Energy Humanities 2.0" is useful here, because it insists that fossility is not

merely an object of critique but an ambient condition shaping literary form and political possibility (Mukherjee, 2021).

Narrative scholarship outside literary studies also contributes to this argument. Brown, Bushell and colleagues, Hermwille, and Harris all demonstrate that climate and transition politics are mediated through stories about agency, responsibility, temporality, and possibility (Brown, 2017; Bushell et al., 2017; Hermwille, 2016; Harris, 2017). Energy transitions do not occur in a narrative vacuum. They depend on public imaginaries of sacrifice, fairness, risk, and collective reward. Speculative literature is therefore not peripheral to energy transition; it is one of the cultural sites where the transition becomes imaginable or unimaginable. This is why the stories societies tell about decarbonization matter so much. A transition narrated as technocratic management will feel very different from one narrated as repair, justice, and shared flourishing.

Contemporary speculative texts also register the danger of techno-optimism. Asayama and Ishii's work on narratives of carbon capture in the Japanese media is illuminating because it shows how technological stories can defer deeper structural transformation (Asayama & Ishii, 2017). Something similar often happens within fiction. Some narratives place their faith in singular innovations that leave social hierarchy intact; others insist that no energy future is just unless it transforms ownership, distribution, and vulnerability. Robinson's work often hovers productively between these positions. His novels remain technologically literate, even hopeful, but they repeatedly return to collective institutions, political struggle, and uneven historical responsibility. That return is crucial. The clean-energy future, speculative literature suggests, cannot simply be purchased as a new consumer option. It must be narrated as an ethical and political reordering.

This has direct relevance to the SDG framework. SDG 7 speaks of affordable and clean energy; SDG 9 addresses industry, innovation, and infrastructure; SDG 12 turns to consumption; and SDG 13 names climate action. Speculative literature clarifies that these goals only become meaningful together. There is no clean energy without infrastructure; no resilient infrastructure without social legitimacy; no responsible consumption without cultural transformation; and no climate action without attention to historical extraction and present inequality. By rendering energy infrastructures narratable, speculative fiction gives literary form to precisely those interdependencies that policy language often states but cannot fully dramatize.

In formal terms, energy-centered speculative literature also teaches readers how to think at multiple scales. A power grid, a sea wall, a drought corridor, a carbon market, a refugee caravan, a rooftop garden, a flooded neighborhood—these are scalar bridges linking the intimate to the planetary. The best speculative texts refuse the split between vastness and immediacy. They understand that climate crisis is experienced as a broken air-conditioning system, a failed crop, a housing market shock, a heatwave death, a migration route, or a government bond before it is experienced as a graph. Literature's singular contribution lies here: it restores sensuous and ethical thickness to infrastructural futures. It makes energy a matter not only of watts and emissions, but of justice, habitation, memory, and desire.

6. Economics Futures: Labor, Automation, Inequality, and Post-Growth Imagination

Speculative literature has long been preoccupied with political economy, but recent texts sharpen that preoccupation in light of automation, platformization, debt, and ecological limit. What they share is a refusal to treat "the economy" as an abstract, impersonal sphere. Instead, they narrate economy as lived temporality: as exhaustion, precarity, bodily risk, coerced mobility, or the fragile promise of common life. In doing so, they disclose what conventional economic language often obscures—that labor regimes are moral regimes, and that futures of work are inseparable from futures of care, environment, and technological design.

Ling Ma's *Severance*, already discussed as pandemic fiction, is equally a novel about labor's temporal discipline. Office life persists long past the point of rationality, and the compulsion to continue working becomes almost absurdly sacred. That absurdity matters because it reveals the ideological tenacity of productivity under crisis. The novel's satire is not directed only at consumer culture or media routine, but at a civilization unable to imagine collective value outside repetitive labor. In this sense, *Severance* belongs beside social-scientific analyses of platform and algorithmic work that show how digital systems intensify surveillance, flexibility, and control under the sign of efficiency (Lehdonvirta, 2018; Jarrahi et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2019). Ma's literary intervention is to make such dynamics existentially and affectively legible.

Chang-rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* offers a more explicitly stratified economic future. Labor

organizes space; space organizes health; and both are sustained by narratives of containment. The novel's caste-like divisions convert economy into ecology: toxicity, food production, bodily risk, and mobility are distributed through classed geography. Barrish is right to identify the political economy of healthcare at the center of Lee's world, but the novel also illuminates how economic order depends upon storytelling. The collective narrator normalizes some arrangements, questions others, and reveals how inequality reproduces itself through habitual perception. This is one reason speculative literature remains indispensable to economic criticism: it shows not only how a system functions, but how it justifies itself affectively.

Speculative fiction is equally alert to the futures of automation and artificial labor. Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* can be read as a novel of care work under technological substitution, where relational attention is both commodified and strangely dignified. Klara is designed to assist, but the novel continually exceeds instrumental logic, asking whether empathy can survive as more than service performance. Similar questions animate works such as Annalee Newitz's *Autonomous*, where pharmaceutical patents, biohacking, and labor contracts expose the deep entanglement of intellectual property and bodily autonomy. In such texts, automation does not eliminate labor; it redistributes it, obscures it, and often heightens the asymmetry between those who own systems and those who inhabit them.

Cory Doctorow's *Walkaway* is perhaps the most explicit attempt within recent Anglophone speculative fiction to imagine an alternative political economy. Its world is still marked by inequality, enclosure, and elite capture, but against that world it stages experiments in commoning, open-source production, and post-scarcity collaboration. The novel is messy, argumentative, and at times programmatic; yet that very excess is part of its interest. It refuses the exhausted binary in which the future must choose between neoliberal catastrophe and authoritarian stabilization. Instead, it imagines abundance through shared knowledge, repair, modular production, and social reorganization. Such visions can seem utopian in the pejorative sense, but Levitas's account of utopia as method helps us see why they matter. Their value lies less in perfect plausibility than in imaginative de-naturalization. They detach economy from the dogma of growth and private accumulation.

This is where post-growth scholarship becomes particularly useful. Banks argues that degrowth and post-growth thinking must attend to cultural production and pleasure rather than imagining sustainability as pure renunciation (Banks, 2022). Kallis and colleagues similarly insist that wellbeing within planetary boundaries requires a science and politics of sufficiency rather than endless expansion (Kallis et al., 2025). Albert's account of growth hegemony clarifies how deeply expansionist common sense remains embedded in political discourse (Albert, 2024). Speculative literature contributes to this conversation by giving post-growth futures affective and narrative shape. It asks what kinds of plot become possible when accumulation no longer functions as the default narrative motor. Repair, maintenance, care, teaching, subsistence, and conviviality—activities often marginalized within growth-centered fiction—move toward the center.

Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* is again useful here because it links climate transformation to financialization and debt. The novel shows that ecological crisis does not automatically dissolve speculative capital; it can just as easily create new markets, new enclosures, and new forms of displacement. Yet the book also imagines counter-movements, collective resistance, and new public vocabularies of value. In this respect it resembles the best critical dystopias, which do not merely rehearse decline but ask which institutions might be repurposed or rebuilt. Economic futures are therefore narrated not only through scarcity but through contest over what counts as wealth, waste, work, and obligation.

Research on the gig economy sharpens the relevance of these literary explorations. Studies of algorithmic management, legitimacy, disconnection rights, and digitally sorted labor markets show that contemporary work is increasingly mediated by opaque systems that promise autonomy while intensifying control (Muldoon & Raekstad, 2023; Waldkirch et al., 2021; McDaid et al., 2023; Wiener et al., 2023; Mendonça & Kougiannou, 2023; Keller, 2023). Platform labor also redistributes risk downward, normalizing contingency as freedom. Speculative literature often translates these tendencies into heightened futures where human value becomes measurable only through usefulness, adaptability, or datafied obedience. Yet by exaggerating the logic, fiction also denaturalizes it. It reminds readers that the present organization of work is not inevitable, only currently hegemonic.

The question of inequality runs through all these texts. SDG 8 speaks of decent work and economic growth, but speculative literature is notably skeptical of the assumption that growth alone can secure decency.

Many recent novels suggest the opposite: under conditions of ecological overshoot and biopolitical sorting, growth can deepen exclusion unless accompanied by redistribution, public care, and infrastructural justice. SDG 10 and SDG 12 are therefore as important to economic reading as SDG 8 itself. Reduced inequalities and responsible consumption are not add-ons to economic life; they are conditions of a livable future. Speculative narratives repeatedly stage the consequences of ignoring this fact.

From a literary standpoint, the most interesting development may be the genre's growing attention to maintenance and mutuality. Older science-fiction futures often privileged expansion, conquest, or novel invention. Many contemporary texts, by contrast, are preoccupied with repair: repairing ecologies, institutions, social trust, or everyday infrastructures. This shift matters. It signals a movement away from heroic developmentalism toward more modest but potentially more sustainable imaginaries. Post-growth fiction, in this broad sense, is not anti-technology. Rather, it asks what technologies become thinkable once they are subordinated to care, durability, and equitable access instead of extraction and scale for its own sake.

Speculative literature thus makes a significant intervention in debates about economy. It renders labor visible, tracks the moral injury of disposability, questions the romance of productivity, and experiments with futures in which value is measured differently. Its economic imagination is at its strongest when it refuses abstraction—when it shows that every model of growth or efficiency must eventually pass through bodies, habitats, and time.

7. Reading Speculative Literature through the Strategic Pillars of the 2030 SDG Framework

The 2030 Agenda is often invoked in policy and development discourse as a universal framework, yet its literary relevance is seldom explored with sufficient depth. This is unfortunate, because speculative literature can illuminate the framework's internal tensions with unusual clarity. Officially, the Agenda is articulated through interdependent commitments to people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership. Read through that architecture, contemporary speculative literature becomes a remarkable interpretive resource. It does not simply endorse the SDGs. Rather, it dramatizes what their interdependence actually feels like under pressure.

The first strategic pillar is people: health, dignity, care, education, and survival. Speculative texts from *Station Eleven* to *Never Let Me Go*, from *Severance* to *Future Home of the Living God*, make clear that wellbeing cannot be reduced to technical medicine. Health is linked to reproductive autonomy, disability justice, public trust, and the infrastructures that make care possible. This literary evidence deepens the significance of SDG 3. Good health and wellbeing require more than innovation; they require social conditions that refuse sacrificial biopolitics. The genre repeatedly shows what happens when some bodies are protected only through the managed vulnerability of others.

The second pillar is planet, inseparable here from energy. Climate fiction and energy-centered speculative literature demonstrate that there is no ecological future without attention to infrastructures of extraction, consumption, and transition. *The Water Knife*, Butler's *Parable* novels, *New York 2140*, and *The Ministry for the Future* all insist that climate action is not a single policy lever. It is a restructuring of water, transport, housing, finance, labor, and public legitimacy. In SDG terms, goals 7, 12, and 13 cannot be meaningfully separated. Clean energy without justice becomes another enclosure; responsible consumption without structural change becomes moralizing rhetoric; climate action without institutional imagination collapses into emergency management.

The third pillar is prosperity, but speculative literature compels us to ask what kind of prosperity is under discussion. If prosperity means aggregate growth regardless of distribution, many speculative futures expose it as a path toward intensified hierarchy. If, however, prosperity is reimagined through decent work, reduced inequality, resilient infrastructure, and sustainable social reproduction, then the genre offers both warning and tentative possibility. Texts such as *On Such a Full Sea*, *Walkaway*, and *New York 2140* reveal that SDGs 8, 9, and 10 remain unstable unless prosperity is detached from extraction and made answerable to care and ecological limit. Post-growth scholarship clarifies the stakes, but speculative fiction gives those stakes narrative body (Banks, 2022; Kallis et al., 2025; Albert, 2024).

Peace and partnership, the remaining pillars, are less explicit in many literary texts yet no less present. Peace in speculative fiction is rarely the absence of conflict; it is the hard-won condition under which institutions can be trusted and common life can be reproduced without militarized scarcity. Partnership appears through

collective experimentation, mutual aid, cross-border governance, and the difficult labor of assembling publics out of fractured worlds. Robinson's institutional imagination is particularly important here, but even smaller-scale narratives of survival communities or care networks point toward the same truth: no sustainable future can be secured by isolated actors.

What literature adds to the SDG conversation is not a substitute for metrics. It adds ethical texture and narrative complexity. Policy frameworks tend to name goals as if alignment were conceptually obvious. Fiction shows how such alignments are lived as compromise, coercion, uncertainty, and uneven sacrifice. It exposes trade-offs that official rhetoric prefers to smooth over. A novel can show, for instance, that the pursuit of innovation without distributive justice deepens inequality; that a clean-energy transition imposed through elite control reproduces colonial logics; or that public-health preparedness without labor reform leaves care infrastructures brittle. These are not arguments against the SDGs. They are arguments for reading them with literary seriousness.

There is another reason speculative literature is especially valuable here. The SDG framework operates normatively: it invites societies to imagine futures worth building. Literature, too, is a normative medium, though in a different register. It shapes desire, fear, attachment, and aversion. It helps publics imagine what counts as livable, repairable, or intolerable. For that reason, speculative literature should be understood as a cultural companion to sustainability discourse. It cannot tell governments precisely how to implement SDG 7 or 10, but it can reveal the narrative conditions under which such goals become imaginable, legitimate, and emotionally durable. In an era when climate fatalism, techno-solutionism, and cynical resignation all compete for cultural dominance, that function is not secondary. It is essential.

8. Conclusion

Contemporary speculative literature has become one of the most searching archives through which to think the future of collective life. Its value lies not in prediction understood as accuracy, but in foresight understood as ethical and narrative testing. By tracing how bodies, infrastructures, and institutions behave under conditions of intensified stress, speculative texts reveal what the present still works to conceal: that health is political economy made flesh, that energy is social order materialized, and that economy is a narrative arrangement before it is an abstract system.

This article has argued that contemporary speculative literature performs this work across three deeply entangled domains. In narratives of pandemic, biotechnology, reproduction, disability, and care, it shows that the future of health cannot be imagined apart from justice, access, and the value assigned to different kinds of bodies. In narratives of climate crisis, fossil dependence, extractivism, and renewable possibility, it renders visible the infrastructures and inequalities that underwrite everyday life. In narratives of labor, automation, debt, and post-growth experimentation, it exposes the human costs of productivity regimes while opening provisional spaces for commoning, repair, and sufficiency. Throughout, literary form matters. World-building, focalization, polyphony, delayed revelation, satire, and estrangement are not decorative techniques. They are the means by which structural knowledge becomes narratively intelligible.

Read alongside the strategic pillars of the 2030 SDG framework, speculative literature offers a distinctive supplement to policy discourse. It does not replace targets or indicators. What it does instead is reveal the social and moral pressures those targets contain. It reminds us that no goal can be isolated from the others; that the future of people depends upon planet and prosperity, and vice versa; and that peace and partnership are not rhetorical afterthoughts but conditions of sustainable survival. Most importantly, speculative literature refuses fatalism. Even its darkest texts preserve the capacity to ask otherwise, to estrange the normal, and to imagine institutions not yet built.

For English literary studies, this means speculative literature should no longer be read only as genre entertainment, allegorical warning, or cultural symptom. It should also be read as a serious form of public thought: a mode of cultural foresight that tests how societies might live otherwise. In a century defined by cascading crises, that imaginative labor is not peripheral to sustainability. It is one of its preconditions.

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