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Do I Dare to Leave the Universe Alone? Environmental Crisis, Narrative Identity, and Collective Agency in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction

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Abstract: Narrative identity, or the construction of a coherent life story to shape a sense of self, is a crucial aspect of identity formation. Narrative identity is impacted by the prevailing cultural narratives during the period of adolescence. This article, drawing on theory from literary studies and sociology, explores the impact of cultural narratives of environmental crisis and destruction on an emerging narrative identity in adolescents as represented in young adult literature. The selected novels—*Dry* by Neal and Jarrod Shusterman, *Green Rising* by Lauren James, and *Snowflake*, *AZ* by Marcus Sedgwick—examine their protagonists' agency and transformational potential. They foreground collective agency and human–nonhuman assemblages as possible responses to environmental crisis. Although two novels (*Dry*, *Green Rising*) affirm that narratives of environmental destruction engage the transformational potential of adolescents for society, the third novel (*Snowflake*, *AZ*) complicates this image and questions whether the impact of narratives of environmental crisis could be too overwhelming for adolescents to bear. The article concludes that the young adolescent protagonists adapt their narrative identity in response to environmental destruction.

Keywords: narrative identity; YA fiction; climate change; characterization; narratology; adolescent identity

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1. Introduction

"Am I a criminal?" Luca, age 15, looks directly into the camera. Together with their best friend Bo, Luca has recently been detained for participating in a non-violent protest organized by Extinction Rebellion, a group of climate activists who employ the tactic of civil disobedience to garner political attention for the ongoing and urgent climate crisis. The arrest was captured on camera by film director Pieter Van Eecke as part of the documentary *Planet B* (Van Eecke 2023), which follows the lives and friendship of Luca and Bo as they go through adolescence while facing the threat of climate change. "No" seems like the obvious answer to Luca's question[1]. Bo and Luca are not criminals but teenagers concerned about their future. For young people, that future has, according to Margaret Somerville, become a "storied future of inevitable entanglement in the fate of the planet" (Somerville 2017, p. 399). The awareness of an entanglement between the fate of the planet and the fate of the individual seems to be an essential feature of growing up in the Anthropocene. Originally proposed as a new epoch marked by the impact of Western industrialized societies on the geological layers of the Earth (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000), the Anthropocene has

become an umbrella term under which to consider the social and ethical implications of our current timeframe[2].

One of the strengths of the documentary *Planet B* is that it depicts the paradoxical and conflicting emotional responses that can arise from living in the Anthropocene. Yes, it is tragic that Bo and Luca, who are only just teenagers, have to spend time in jail for asking older generations to consider their future. However, the documentary also portrays examples of intergenerational parental love and care[3] that cannot be overlooked, either. And yes, it is absolutely grim that Bo and Luca need to actively search for ways to convince the political apparatus that their lives matter, but they are doing this in a seemingly idyllic fashion: hanging out with friends, laughing, sitting in the long summer grass while the sun is warming their faces. It is this emotional contrast between the threat of human extinction and the inevitability of people seeking joy and meaning in companionship that prompts us to consider how contemporary young adult literature imagines the impact of environmental crisis on the developing selfhood of adolescents.

The circumstances for adolescents in the Western world have definitely changed over the past decades. The omnipresence of technologies that constantly demand attention, for instance, or the increase in cultural narratives of planetary destruction that leave young people without a perspective for the future, are just two ways in which growing up in the Anthropocene is different from before. However, the way in which adolescents build their selfhood in the Western world, by experimenting socially to discover who they are and how they are seen by others, remains the same. This is due to what Robyn McCallum calls the "dialogic construction of subjectivity". McCallum notes that "ideas about and images of the self are defined in relation to existing social codes, structures and practices" (McCallum 1999, p. 256). Even when the instability of the world order pressures the social codes and practices of the Western world, Western adolescents will still experiment with these social codes and structures to construct their particular narrative identity. According to the sociologists McAdams and Mclean, a narrative identity is "an internalized and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose" (McAdams and McLean 2013, p. 233). As people use patterns from a menu of cultural narratives to construct their narrative identity, the current cultural moment, which is marked by stories of planetary destruction and extinction instead of societal progression, influences how adolescents construct their selfhood. In the Anthropocene, the quest for meaning, expressed here through the concept of narrative identity, comes into conflict with the ostensible impossibility of a meaningful life under the threat of destruction.

Using the real teenagers from *Planet B* as a starting point, this article questions how YA literature, a genre dedicated to understanding the twin properties of growth and power (Trites 2000), is negotiating the entanglement of personal and planetary fate. According to Roberta Seelinger Trites, "all YA novels depict some postmodern tension between individuals and institutions. And the tension is often depicted as residing within discursive constructs. Once protagonists of the YA novel have learned to discursively negotiate their place in the domination-repression chain of power, they are usually depicted as having grown" (Trites 2000, p. 52). However, with the sword of Damocles of climate change hanging over adolescents' heads, the tension between adolescence and power is not simply a matter of discourse. Instead, as Alice Curry notes, "unlike child readers, whose potential for effective social responses to climate change is limited, young adults await the imminent transgression that will see them affirm, or refute, the social systems that regulate them" (Curry 2016, p. 23). In other words, to properly engage with the challenges of the environmental crisis, contemporary environmental YA fiction should offer different ways to understand both growth (i.e., narrative identity) and power (i.e., agency

on the personal and collective level). Therefore, this article examines how current cultural narratives of future destruction influence the construction of adolescents' narrative identity. We have selected three novels that each present a different scenario of environmental crisis. In Neal and Jarrod Shusterman's *Dry*, teenagers, who have all grown up with different kinds of parental care, have to try to survive when California's water supply dries up. In Lauren James' *Green Rising* (James 2021), adolescents from different backgrounds develop the ability to grow plants from their fingertips. Their new hybridity evokes a different understanding of the transformative potential of human networks and nonhuman agency. In *Snowflake, AZ*, by Marcus Sedgwick (Sedgwick 2019), a young adolescent is made ill by the modernity of the world. This ecosickness narrative (Houser 2016) seems to ask how one can regain agency in an unstable world driven by the idea of eternal growth. The three books offer depictions of adolescent protagonists that are all impacted by environmental crisis just when they are starting to construct who they are. While not all the selected novels' protagonists can rise to meet the immediate threat of ecological crisis with decisive action, every one of their fates is inextricably tangled with that of the planet.

2. Planetary Fate and a Developing Narrative Identity

As a genre, YA literature has always been invested in growth and power as the adolescent comes into contact with the world. However, Robyn McCallum argues that "the image of empowered individuals capable of acting independently in the world and of making choices about their lives offers young readers a worldview which for many is simply idealistic and unattainable" (McCallum 1999, p. 7). Especially in times where power seems to be both at the tip of our fingers (for instance, through social media) and unreachable (climate crisis seems too big a crisis to handle), YA fiction needs to portray the developing selfhood of adolescents with necessary nuance. For instance, the question that young Prufrock asks himself in T.S. Eliot's poem and that is at the heart of Trites' discussion of YA literature, "Do I dare disturb the universe?", rings differently in a world where the universe has already been disturbed to the point of destruction. Alice Curry argues that the destruction that comes with the apocalypse is the "tipping point" that targets "the very values, relationships and social structures on which human life as we know it is based" (Curry 2016, p. 25). The apocalypse thus functions as an "epistemic blind space", a space in which "humanity's relationship with the earth can—and for the novel's protagonists, must—be reassessed" (Curry 2016, p. 193). However, the dominant focus on the apocalypse in YA literature ignores how climate change already impacts the lives of adolescents today, in the pre-apocalyptic world.

That climate change is a genuine concern for many adolescents today, one that impacts how they act in and on the world, was visible through the Youth for Climate movement. Although this is not the first generation to be confronted with and prominently engage with sociopolitical issues (e.g., the civil rights movement and Vietnam war protests), climate change remains a uniquely configured challenge. Firstly, climate change is what is often called a "wicked problem" (Levin et al. 2012), where the complexity of the issue, involving numerous conflicting parties and interests, can feel dispiriting. Secondly, the idea that, with anthropogenic climate change, the effects of our actions are always delayed adds an intergenerational dimension to this crisis. A notion such as "colonizing the future" (Van Reybrouck 2022), i.e., the theft by current generations of the resources of future generations, poignantly lays bare the fact that we need different tactics to imagine the consequences of our actions on future lives. Lastly, in the Western world, the notion of entanglement with the fate of the planet has led young people to what Sarah Pickard calls a do-it-ourselves politics, "which is 'enacted through lifestyle politics involving everyday decisions and

daily habits" (Pickard 2022, p. 732). For young people, in a very profound way, the fate of the planet is part of the everyday.

The sociological concept of narrative identity informs the way in which we approach the entanglement between personal and planetary fate in our analysis of the three contemporary YA novels. Sociologists argue that personal identity develops in accordance with narrative structures. In adolescence, people begin to retrospectively order their memories and link them to their present selves, setting out to craft their "life story" (Mclean and Mansfield 2012; Chen et al. 2012). Although certain aspects of identity begin to form earlier in childhood, the narrative construction of a cohesive life story does not start until adolescence, since only then do individuals develop the ability to reflect on past experiences and incorporate them into an overarching narrative (McAdams 2011). In relation to climate change, projections of the future among contemporary adolescents are different to those of earlier generations, as ideas for the future are now mixed with feelings of anxiety and hopelessness (Clayton 2020).

From a more philosophical perspective, Paul Ricœur writes that the narrative mediation of identity "borrows from history as much as fiction" (Ricœur 1991, p. 73). Thus, our life stories are a mixture of fact and fiction. Memories are infused with a sense of meaning and teleology. The life stories that we create for ourselves, consciously or subconsciously, give us a sense of purpose and self-continuity (Habermas and Bluck 2000). While narrative identity has been thoroughly explored in social sciences, it also has potential for analysis in literary studies, where it has so far remained underexplored. Given the similarities between the readerly experiences of characters and "real" people established by, for example, Palmer (2004) and Zunshine (2006), we argue that the concept can be equally applied to the construction of identity in fictional characters. This, in turn, allows us to look at the ways in which people and characters navigate and remediate "inconsistencies" in their life stories. For environmental YA fiction, this means that it is not necessary to imagine an apocalypse to consider the impact of environmental crisis on adolescence. Instead, by focusing on how climate change can cause adolescents to construct their narrative identity in accordance with a cultural narrative of future destruction, YA fiction can accurately explore how the current timeframe is helping to shape contemporary adolescents' selfhood. The three novels that we have selected engage with environmental crisis in a semi-contemporary setting (although apocalypse is never far away) and explore the impact of a cultural narrative of future destruction. They engage with both realistic and fantastical modes in order to materialize the abstract issue of climate change into something more concrete, as well as to explore the affective dimension of growing up in the Anthropocene.

3. Peers and Parents in *Dry*

In Shusterman and Shusterman's *Dry* (Shusterman and Shusterman 2018), an already-barren Southern California's water supply is cut off. With no water available from the taps, the thin veneer of civil society quickly cracks. The novel follows four teenagers who have all grown up with different forms of parental care and are now, due to the circumstances, forced to fend for themselves. The narration and focalization, which switch between the teenage voices with every chapter, shows how their narrative identity is reshaped by this ecological disaster. From the perspective of a self-constructed narrative identity, the act of narrating is as crucial as the experience. As Michael Bamberg writes, "narratives, irrespective of whether they deal with one's life or an episode or event in the life of someone else, always reveal the speaker's identity. [. . .] By offering and telling a narrative, the speaker lodges a claim for him/herself in terms of who he/she is". (Bamberg 2005, p. 223) Bamberg goes on to state that the sharing of personal stories is a social happening where the speaker positions themselves as a (partly fictional) character to highlight certain

aspects or major themes of who they are. He stresses that people do not consistently position themselves homogeneously in the different stories that they tell but juggle "several story lines simultaneously" (Bamberg 2005, p. 224) to stake the claim that they are well-rounded, multifaceted individuals. In *Dry*, there are two groups of people who impact the positioning of the protagonists' narrative identity: the parents and the peers.

As the parents are absent during the actual moment of crisis, it is the contact with and the gaze of their peers that co-construct how they will make critical life-or-death decisions. These decisions come from a narrative identity that is still taking shape and is now challenged by completely new circumstances. Alyssa, for example, sees herself as someone with a clear political point of view on gun control, one of the major sociopolitical topics in the US in recent decades. When Kelton brings a gun to Alyssa's home for protection, her first reaction comes from this particular aspect of her selfhood: "'I marched against these!' [. . .] 'How could you bring one into my house?'" (Shusterman and Shusterman 2018, p. 93). Later, however, while looking at the gun's magazine, Alyssa thinks, "It represents everything that I hate about the world. But this isn't the same world it was yesterday. Finally I hand [Kelton] the magazine, then I start pedaling again, because I don't want to see him snap it into the pistol". (Shusterman and Shusterman 2018, p. 99) Alyssa is conflicted about having to violate her ideals to survive but eventually puts aside her moral convictions in favor of the more pressing problem of survival. However, by telling Kelton that she marched against guns first, Alyssa clearly positions herself in a narrative as a character in favor of gun control. According to Michael Bamberg, this performative "positioning" serves to propose certain aspects of identity in a social setting (Bamberg 2005). In subsequently having to act "out of character" by giving Kelton the magazine of the gun back, effectively not performing the identity that she proposed, Alyssa dissociates herself from the identity that she was adopting, creating a discontinuity in her emerging life story. Feeling as if she has trespassed against her dominant identity, she is unable to look at Kelton loading the magazine into the gun. Kate McLean and Cade Mansfield write that "when the canonical story is broken, often by a negative disruption, narrative is the means by which the break can be mended" (Mclean and Mansfield 2012, p. 437). In this case, Alyssa starts to adapt her narrative identity to account for the imminent crises by placing the need for survival above her moral convictions of being anti-gun. In this way, she can reconcile her disruptive actions with her overarching life story.

Even in the extreme circumstances of the Tap-Out, as the crisis is called, the adolescent protagonists remain acutely aware of their relationship with their peers. Consider the following excerpt, where Alyssa has just found out that Kelton used to spy on her with his drone:

> There's a battle raging in my head now. Part of me wants to file this away and deal with it when we're not in a crisis. His brother is dead. There are more life-and-death challenges we have to face. Yet there's the other part of me that will not be silenced or ignored. The normal part, which won't let such an unacceptable act slide just because there are bigger things to worry about. No matter what else is going on, I have every right to what I'm feeling. (Shusterman and Shusterman 2018, p. 278)

The crisis in which Alyssa finds herself partly inhibits her reaction to the betrayal and feeling of powerlessness caused by Kelton spying on her. Yet, she realizes that her "normal" identity, her dominant life story, does not allow this infringement on her privacy. While she tries to suppress her reaction, just like with the gun, she finds herself unable to. Alyssa shows the possibility of adapting her narrative identity to account for new realities, but she struggles to completely let go of some parts of her established life story.

Of course, parental care is also an important part of a constructed narrative identity. Or, as Trites argues with Lacan, "the idea of the parent is so seductive, so central to the subject's sense of –definition" (Trites 2000, p. 61). Furthermore, in YA literature, the parental figure is often problematic, as they "usually serve more as sources of conflict than as sources of support" (Trites 2000, p. 56). Trites notes that even "their physical absence often creates a psychological presence that is remarked upon as a sort of repression felt strongly by the adolescent character" (Trites 2000, p. 56). In *Dry*, parental care is indeed presented as a complicated spectrum of control and letting go, of absence and presence.

Alyssa and her little brother Garrett grew up with loving parents, who go missing in the beginning of the catastrophe. This prompts Alyssa and Garrett to head out to find and save them. The idea that children need and want to save their parents resonates with dominant environmental discourse that sees the child as proxy for a future generation that serves as the beacon of hope (Kverndokk 2020; Jewusiak 2023). Alyssa and Garrett, however, are woefully unprepared for such a task: "Returning home means a measure of safety, but it also means failure. Unless Mom and Dad returned while we were gone. I hold onto that hope like the frayed end of a lifeline, because I still refuse to face any of the alternatives" (Shusterman and Shusterman 2018, p. 136). Alyssa and Garrett thus need to rely on their peers who have been raised differently, such as Kelton.

Kelton grew up with parents who fit in the category of so-called doomsday preppers, and Kelton oscillates between idolizing and despising his upbringing. The crisis, however, confronts Kelton with the truth about his parents. Not only were their invented doomsday scenarios a response to a deeply rooted but imagined fear, all the doomsday prep in the world still did not prepare them for the consequences of the Tap-Out. This leads Kelton to realize the truth about his parents: "But there's that moment when you realize they're not superheroes, or villains. They're painfully, unforgivably human. The question is, can you forgive them for being human anyway?" (Shusterman and Shusterman 2018, p. 150).

Henry, the son of sly mercantile parents, who left Henry to his own devices during the crisis, caricatures the position of self-serving rich people who stand to benefit from the crisis: "The Tap-Out has not only contributed to my growth as a person, but has proven to be a fantastic learning experience in business and commerce". (Shusterman and Shusterman 2018, p. 186) The final position on the spectrum is Jacqui, whose parents had too many struggles of their own and, too, left her to fend for herself. This has left Jacqui with a tendency toward self-destruction, always attending to what she refers to as the *call of the void*: "daring the universe to end you" [. . .] "I know that feeling intimately. It's where I live, I eat, sleep and dream of the void, and whenever it calls my name, I'm there in the front row ready to answer" (Shusterman and Shusterman 2018, pp. 123–4). The juxtaposition of these versions of parental care offers an image of the previous generation as either self-serving, scared, careless, or simply naïve. The protagonists, as is of course a central trope in most YA literature, must either embrace or reject these positions.

Environmental crisis forces the adolescents in *Dry* to reconsider their early narrative identity. This early selfhood has been shaped by the care of their parents, who in this narrative do not simply perform the role of an authority to be railed against. *Dry* depicts a more complicated version of the intergenerational dimension of climate crisis. The novel suggests that the current environmental crisis exceeds individual parental care. Instead, what is needed to face the crisis is collaborative action between adolescents from all walks of life.

4. Information Dissemination and Multispecies Collectives in *Green Rising*

In Lauren James' *Green Rising*, 1 in 20 adolescents suddenly develop the ability to grow plants from their bodies. With the actual power to reverse climate change at their fingertips, these "Greenfingers", as the adolescents are quickly called, find themselves fighting Dalek Energies, a major oil corporation. Due to their plant-growing abilities, the "Greenfingers" can contact and share experiences with each other collectively through a mycorrhizal network. Theoretical paradigms that have been inspired by environmental crisis and the consequences of the Anthropocene framework, such as new materialism or posthumanism, aim to decentralize the human and foreground human–nonhuman collectives and assemblages. The plant–young adult hybrids in *Green Rising* speak to these perspectives, as well as to the growing interest in multispecies collectives (Caracciolo 2020; Lambert 2021). As Chloe Germaine notes in her discussion of *Green Rising*, the novel draws "on a more contemporary construction of the child as a social agent whose action will bring about transformative political change, as well as a more generous account of the agency inherent in vegetal life" (Germaine 2023, p. 159). These two dimensions, the political and the nonhuman, are explored in the character of Hester, the daughter of the oil company's CEO.

Initially, Hester has been groomed by her father into being the perfect successor for the CEO position of Dalek Energies. She has been sheltered from her peers her whole life: "She could talk to a delegation of businessmen without breaking a sweat, but a group of teenagers? There was no training course she could take to prepare for that" (James 2021, p. 52). The selfhood that was built for her by her father quickly crumbles when Hester discovers, through intense contact with other adolescents, the true scale and severity of climate change. Such a major challenge to a person's narrative identity can result in two different responses. One response is for the break to be mended through narrative (re)construction. For example, *Dry*'s Alyssa mends the break by constructing a narrative where her atypical actions are warranted in temporary circumstances. The second response is the integration of the disruptive element into the person's life story, where it can even become the dominant narrative thread (Pals 2006). Jennifer Pals writes that an important aspect of this second process is "exploratory narrative processing", "the active, engaged effort on the part of the narrator to explore, reflect on, or analyze a difficult experience with an openness to learning from it and incorporating a sense of change into the life story" (Pals 2006, p. 1081). She notes that integrating exploratory narrative processing with a coherent positive resolution can foster lasting self-transformation. Difficult experiences, as challenges to identity, become essential to life stories, shaping personal growth and well-being.

Upon discovering that her narrative identity has been built on the lies of her father, Hester has to radically shift her narrative to address the invasive climate change that has acted as a disruptive narrative thread in her original, dominant life story. At first, Hester and her father seek a consolidation between their two different stories. Hester offers her father the opportunity of reconciliation by imploring that there must be a way for him to save the planet, while her father continues to manipulate his daughter, arguing for the necessity of oil consumption. Returning to McCallum's notion of the dialogic nature of subjectivity, Hester will rebuild her narrative identity in dialog with a conflicted and confusing political reality, forcing her to choose between pragmatical and moral positions.

The ethical and pragmatical implications of Hester's reconfigured personal narrative identity, what Germaine sees as the child's potential for "transformative, political change" (159) in *Green Rising* receives a counterpoint through the idea of the plant–human hybridity of the "Greenfingers". As a "Greenfinger", Hester is a member of a group of adolescents

that has started to develop an intersubjective, collective identity through their enhanced connection to nature. Through their powers, "Greenfingers" can use a mycorrhizal network to contact other "Greenfingers". This direct and embodied network functions as a thought experiment: what happens if we see agency differently? Or, as Shannon Lambert notes, how might "bodily patterns, chemicals and affects" help in reconsidering agency as "non-singular and nonanthropocentric" (Lambert 2021, pp. 15–16)? In *Narratology Beyond the Human: Storytelling and Animal Life*, David Herman argues that "resituating oneself vis à vis other forms of creatural life can alter one's sense of who and what one is" (Herman 2018, p. 63). Herman sees two possible positions: metamorphosis and hybridity. The hybrid is, in Herman's words, "the self in dialogue with the other", whereas metamorphosis is a "self becoming other" (Herman 2018, p. 51). Hybridity and metamorphosis describe how the novel constructs coming-of-age in the Anthropocene. The plant–young adult hybrid depicts an exaggeration of our entanglement with the non-human, where the element of metamorphosis, the young adult finding their place in a shifted world, depicts the difficulties of negotiating the new political realities in the Anthropocene.

The mycorrhizal network, offering "Greenfingers" the experience of collectivity, is of course unavailable in real life. This fictional, symbiotic relationship cannot be weaponized in the fight against environmental crisis. However, the juxtaposition of the mycorrhizal network with a different kind of network does highlight other options that are available to young people today. This real option might even be more achievable and more effective, as it is a power that is already being used by many adolescents today: social media. At the end of each chapter, which is very traditionally narrated by a third-person narrator and closely focalized through one of the protagonists, the reader finds texts in different textual genres. These are all forms of public communication: public safety notices, online forum posts, social media posts, advertisements, Buzzfeed-type quizzes and clickbait articles, scientific abstracts, podcasts (presented here as a transcript), vlogs (presented as a transcript), newspaper articles, live reports, and group chats. All these forms of communication display what Alan Palmer calls the "intermental mind" (Palmer 2005), a long-lasting, shared cognition between a group of people. In some ways, these collective communications function like a mycorrhizal network, warning others about what it is like to grow up under the pressures of the Anthropocene.

Green Rising resonates with contemporary ideas of adolescence, arguing for the transformative power in young people and our collective human–nonhuman nature. However, not all adolescents react the same way to the challenges brought forward by living in the Anthropocene. The knowledge that we are living on a dying planet can also overwhelm and paralyze.

5. Sickness, Illness, and Lethargy in *Snowflake, AZ*

Where *Dry* and *Green Rising* offer characters that are capable and agentic, characters that young people can project their hopes for themselves on, *Snowflake, AZ* by Marcus Sedgwick takes a different approach to investigating the entanglement between personal and planetary fate. *Snowflake, AZ* is what Heather Houser calls an ecosickness narrative, which functions to address "the inseparability of our somatic and ecological fates" (Houser 223). In *Snowflake, AZ*, young adult Ash is searching for their lost brother and ends up in a community of outsiders in Snowflake, Arizona. The community comprises people who have withdrawn from the modern world, because modernity—for instance, electricity, microwaves, or modern chemicals—made them ill. This undefined environmental illness (EI) also affects Ash, who becomes lethargic in the face of the overwhelming origin of their illness.

The novel distinctly connects Ash's illness with the fate of the world by framing the story as narrated by an older Ash in a post-apocalyptic future: "And we were all sick, we were all sick. We just didn't know it yet" (Sedgwick 2019, p. 342). Heather Houser uses the term sickness to emphasize "the relational dimension of dysfunction in contemporary narrative" (Houser 2016, p. 11). For Houser, sickness "links up the biomedical, environmental, social, and ethicopolitical" and "shows the imbrication of human and environment" (Houser 2016, p. 11). Sickness thus comes from an entanglement of the personal with all these systemic socio-economic forces, which exert a deep influence on the personal level. The people of Snowflake call themselves the "Canaries" for being the proverbial canaries in the coal mine, ignored by rational and scientific thinking but experiencing real consequences nonetheless. In fact, what they are feeling is the imposition of macro socio-economic forces on the personal scale. This feeling is expressed in their illness, which is different from the idea of sickness. According to Houser, illness is related to or defined by personal experience: "regardless of what blood tests, scans, x-rays, or biopsies might show, illness exists to the extent that someone lives with it and even assumes it as an identity. Self-perception decouples person and diagnosis; whatever the content of the diagnosis or treatment might be, the person can determine the form and meaning that illness assumes" (Houser 2016, p. 11). Ash's environmental illness indeed goes undiagnosed and unacknowledged by society. Through the ideas of a systemic world sickness and a personal illness, the novel articulates how a cultural narrative of environmental crisis can overwhelm young people in such a way that there is little of their transformational potential left.

Ash's defeated reaction to their realization of being ill is characteristic of their stay in Snowflake. In stark contrast with Alyssa in *Dry* and Hester in *Green Rising*, who both respond to their crises with resolute and decisive action, Ash reacts to the intrusion of changing planetary forces in their life with resignation and inaction. They become gradually more withdrawn from society and, eventually, even withdraw from the group of similarly afflicted people as they move to a log cabin on their own: "And like I said before, there is no point in me telling you all about each of those days. What happened was this: I was sick, I was tired, I could barely move, and I became the most miserable kid in Arizona". (Sedgwick 2019, p. 113) Ash's illness leads to an alienation from society. As Robyn McCallum writes, "[i]n general terms, alienation in its various aspects—powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, social isolation, self-estrangement and cultural estrangement---denotes the radical, perceived or actual, separation of the self from the social world; the inverse of subjectivity" (McCallum 1999, p. 99). Where Alyssa (*Dry*) and Hester (*Green Rising*) affirm their narrative identities around their potential for transformation, both on the personal scale and on the social scale, young Ash, due to their possibly psychosomatic illness, cannot build a narrative identity around agency, as they feel that they have none in the modern world. Older Ash, however, who narrates the story retrospectively, does see what they could have done but failed to do: "[. . .] I thought, huh, Ash, maybe you was a snowflake, but so was we all. [. . .] We were all as fragile as a tiny crystal of ice. And then I thought, but yeah, you put a lot of snowflakes together and what have you got? You got an avalanche". (Sedgwick 2019, p. 341) This realization, that agency comes not from the individual but from the collective, resonates with *Dry* and *Green Rising*. However, Ash does not realize this during the social experimentation phase of Western adolescence but only when it is too late.

In *Snowflake, AZ*, the intrusion of environmental crisis does not spark any action in the adolescent protagonist. The cultural narrative of a sick world does, however, pervade their narrative identity and strongly affect their subjectivity, as it alienates Ash from society, and they therefore cannot build a narrative identity around their transformational potential and agency. *Snowflake, AZ* therefore offers a disturbing counterpoint to *Dry* and *Green Rising*

and shows how climate change, in this the case, the cultural narrative of the anthropogenic destruction of the planet and the lack of future perspective, can be so overwhelming that it leads to lethargy. By the end, it remains unclear how Ash, as a single young adult, will acquire any agency in the face of climate change. Although the novel does point towards a collective agency and identity as a possible solution for environmental crisis, it does not seem to underscore the transformative potential of adolescence. Instead, *Snowflake, AZ* seems to indicate that the challenge of climate crisis in the Anthropocene is too massive to handle.

6. Conclusions

In this article, we have suggested that the current environmental crisis is so pervasively present in current cultural narratives that it becomes co-constitutive in adolescents' narrative identity. We started from the premise that the Anthropocene, the awareness of an entanglement between our personal fate and that of the planet, conjures up conflicting affects and ethical implications for young people growing up today. While young people still need to experiment with the social codes and values of contemporary society to discover who they are, they also need to take into account cultural narratives of environmental destruction. The YA novels discussed here have shown three ways of considering the impact of environmental crisis on the construction of selfhood. *Dry* imagines the sudden collapse of civility, brought on by a water shortage. This apocalyptic event forces adolescents to reconstitute their narrative identity vis à vis who they were before the event, as well as vis à vis each other. The parental generation is not the enemy in this novel, as the systemic problems causing the environmental crisis are much more complicated than the simplified intergenerational conflict that is often conjured in environmental discourse. *Green Rising* foregrounds how a collective mind, imagined here both in the mycorrhizal network of the multispecies "Greenfingers" collective and the mixture of different textual genres, can inspire and uplift the construction of a narrative identity that is collective in nature. Lastly, *Snowflake, AZ* employs an ecosickness narrative to explicitly fuse the fate of the planet and one character's personal fate. Here, however, the sickness of the world becomes an insurmountable problem that takes away all agency from the young protagonist. In fact, the different types of crises presented in these novels all seem to indicate that the best option for meaningful transformative action is collective agency. We believe that by focusing on the literary representation of the entanglement between the developing narrative identity of adolescents and the cultural narratives of planetary destruction, we can better understand the peculiarity of growing up in the Anthropocene. Further research could add nuance to and enhance this proposition by including non-fictional accounts written by young adults growing up in the Anthropocene, such as McAnulty's (2021) or Lack's (2022). The use of empirical methodologies, both in literary studies and sociology, can further strengthen our understanding of what it means to grow up with the fate of the planet entangled with your own.

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Notes

[1] Unfortunately, democratic countries from the Global North seem to disagree as they are passing new draconian laws to disproportionately sentence climate protesters to long periods in prison (see the recent report by Trevor Stankiewicz (Stankiewicz 2024) for Climate Rights International *On Thin Ice: Disproportionate Responses to Climate Change Protesters in Democratic Countries*).

[2] Even though the suggestion for the Anthropocene as a new geological epoch has been rejected by the Anthropocene Working Group, the term clearly sparked the academic imagination and quickly entered academic and popular discourse, with Hamilton et al. (2015) even referring to the Anthropocene as a 'new human condition' (4). However, the term Anthropocene (>Anthropos meaning human) does not accurately evoke the distinctions between different human contributions to current environmental crisis, nor does it evoke the systemic forces that have contributed to climate crisis. Therefore, scholars have suggested alternative names for the Anthropocene, such as Plantationocene, Capitalocene, or Chthulucene. See Haraway (2015) for a discussion of these different terms. We acknowledge the lack of nuance inherent in the term Anthropocene. However, because it is already widely accepted, we continue to use this term.

[3] In the documentary, this love is expressed in a very prototypical way: when Bo arrives home after spending the night in jail, her parents ask her if she managed to get some sleep and have a proper meal, as if she had just come home from summer camp.

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