



Child Minds at the End of the World

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Abstract This article focuses on the evocation of children's experiences in fiction that engages with postapocalyptic scenarios. It examines three contemporary novels from profoundly different geographic contexts—Yoko Tawada's *The Emissary*, Niccolò Ammaniti's *Anna*, and Diane Cook's *The New Wilderness*—that evoke a child's experience of societal collapse in the wake of a catastrophic event. Diverse meanings come to the fore as these novels outline, through child focalization, the relevance of bodily experience, materiality, and reenchantment vis-à-vis the climate crisis and its uncertainties. This discussion shows how formal choices in climate fiction are instrumental in creating an affective trajectory that complicates adult readers' perception of our collective future. These close readings stage an encounter between the fields of ecocriticism and childhood studies that speaks to the significance of the figure of the child in the environmental humanities: even in literature by and for adults, the integration of children's perspectives on the end of the world performs important cultural work by questioning and decentering an understanding of the ecological crisis shaped exclusively by the adult (and adultist) anxieties of parenthood.

Keywords childhood studies, narratology, climate change, future, uncertainty

The last few years have seen the emergence of youth activism as an important force within the environmental movement. Embodied by figures such as Greta Thunberg, Anuna De Wever, and Luisa Neubauer, youth activism has drawn public and media attention to the intergenerational dimension of climate change: how the decisions made, or not, by governments and corporations today will shape the future of younger generations for decades to come. Thunberg's high-profile address at the United Nations' (UN) Climate Action Summit in September 2019 hinges on the opposition, expressed in characteristically incisive language, between “you” and “we”—with the former being the adults who are responsible for the climate catastrophe the world is rushing toward, and the latter being the children and young adults who will have to “live with the consequences.” Within this oppositional structure, Thunberg takes aim at the older generation's inability to face up to the emergency, flipping conventional roles as she—a teenager—rebukes policy makers for their lack of maturity: “You are still not mature enough to tell it like it is.”¹

1. Both quotations are drawn from Thunberg, “Transcript: Greta Thunberg's Speech.”

Thunberg's stern message and the youth activism that supports it are remarkable because they overturn the culturally dominant way of framing the image of the child vis-à-vis the climate crisis—namely, as inherently vulnerable and therefore powerless without parental care. As Adeline Johns-Putra puts it in a recent study of literary fiction engaging with climate change, the “discourse of environmentalist crisis in the Anthropocene is peppered with . . . references to parental obligations to posterity, creating a sense of transcendence and timelessness on the one hand and conjuring up elemental feelings of care and love on the other.”² This understanding of the child reinforces a heteronormative model of sexual reproduction that still enjoys wide circulation within the environmental movement, as argued influentially by Nicole Seymour.³ Furthermore, parental care can slide problematically into what Johns-Putra calls “biological survivalism”—a position whereby environmental responsibility is tied, narrowly, to preserving one's genetic identity, rather than involving a larger commitment to the thriving of human communities and nonhuman species. Perhaps even more fundamentally, presenting children exclusively from the standpoint of parenthood undercuts the agency of younger generations toward the climate crisis—the kind of agency claimed by Thunberg in her highly mediatized UN speech. Youth activism like Thunberg's opposes this reductive understanding of the child as either a future victim of climate disaster or the source of parental uneasiness over the future: it reclaims children's role in a climate debate that concerns them not only as future “inheritors” of the earth—to use another problematically conventional metaphor—but also as political agents capable of shaping the crisis in the present. As Nina Christensen argues, “A focus on agency provides an alternative to viewing the child as vulnerable and dependent on adult power and protection.”⁴ It is this kind of political agency that Thunberg embraces by accusing adult politicians of reckless immaturity.⁵

Contemporary fiction that engages the climate crisis is also invested in the project of extricating children from assumptions of vulnerability and rethinking their agency through the mediation of narrative form. As fiction imagines scenarios shaped, more or less realistically, by climate change, children reject adults' nostalgic longing for the preapocalyptic world and cultivate adaptation and acceptance of an unstable future. Furthermore, children reinvent community and rediscover materiality by resisting the binaries (human versus animal, material versus psychological, etc.) typical of Western modernity.

Not all instances of “climate fiction” are equally committed to this reappraisal of the child, of course.⁶ This article explores three contemporary works that are particularly successful in uncoupling children from parental care, foregrounding their agency—

2. Johns-Putra, *Climate Change*, 5.

3. Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*.

4. Christensen, “Agency,” 13.

5. See also Martínez García, “Constructing an Activist Self,” for a comprehensive analysis of Thunberg's rhetoric in both public speaking and internet remarks.

6. For more on the definition of climate fiction, see—in addition to Johns-Putra's *Climate Change*—Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions*, and LeMenager, “Climate Change and the Struggle for Genre.”

their capacity to reshape the world in opposition to the conventional dichotomies of Western thinking: *The Emissary* (2014), by Japanese writer (but based in Germany since the 1980s) Yoko Tawada; *Anna* (2015), by Italian writer Niccolò Ammaniti; and *The New Wilderness* (2020), by American writer Diane Cook. While ecocritical discussions of climate fiction have tended to favor Anglophone literature, the geographic and cultural diversity of these works shows that the imagination of childhood is an important site for confronting the climate crisis and its uncertainties around the globe—and indeed the global dimension of the crisis is explicitly thematized by Tawada's novel.

In the works I discuss in the following pages, the child's independence is underscored by the adoption of the narrative technique of internal focalization, which consists in rendering a scene as if from the experiential perspective of a character (known as the "focalizing" character).⁷ I will show how child focalization can complicate a conventional understanding of both childhood and intergenerational relationships in post-apocalyptic fiction that imagines the consequences of societal collapse. My approach thus situates itself at the intersection of literary analysis and a discussion of the broader stakes of climate change as human societies are increasingly threatened by rising sea levels and global temperatures, ocean acidification, and related environmental issues. I am interested in the uncertainty that the ecological crisis brings into view by destabilizing the planetary system as we know it. I argue that child focalization can offer new perspectives on such uncertainty through the literary negotiation of ideas that are at the center of contemporary nonhuman-oriented theories by, among others, Stacy Alaimo and Jane Bennett.⁸ As we will see, it is particularly human embodiment that is redefined in relation to nonhuman materiality as children take on narrative agency via internal focalization.

It is important to stress that climate change is not equally central to the novels by Tawada, Ammaniti, and Cook. These works should be understood as fictions that stage environmental issues, or human-nonhuman relations, rather than as climate change fictions in the narrow sense. Ammaniti's *Anna*, for example, takes place after a deadly pandemic (known as the "Red Fever") has decimated the Earth's population, sparing only children and teenagers younger than fourteen years of age. In Tawada's *The Emissary*, the global economy has collapsed and Japan is forced to cope with the aftermath of a major disaster, perhaps linked to nuclear fallout. Only in Cook's *The New Wilderness* is the ecological crisis staged straightforwardly: the protagonists are involved in a

7. Narrative theorists have written extensively about focalization, a term coined by Gérard Genette in *Narrative Discourse* (see also Jahn, "Focalization"). For the purposes of this article, I define *focalization* as a textual focus on private experiences—that is, experiences that could not be easily apprehended from an observer's perspective. For more on this account of internal focalization, see Caracciolo and Kukkonen, *With Bodies*, chap. 3.

8. Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*; Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*. See Grusin, *Nonhuman Turn*, for a comprehensive introduction to this "nonhuman turn" in contemporary thinking. See also Caracciolo, *Contemporary Fiction and Climate Uncertainty*, for a book-length discussion on how contemporary literature engages uncertainty as a central dimension of the climate crisis.

scientific experiment on human survival in the last remaining wilderness, while cities groan under the weight of rampant pollution and overpopulation. Yet, even in the two novels that do not explicitly reference climate change, the formal and stylistic solutions adopted by the authors speak to questions of intergenerational responsibility and children's agency vis-à-vis a crisis of global proportions. It is under this conceptual lens that I will examine these novels. Indeed, the larger assumption underpinning my approach is that the problem of narrating climate change goes far beyond how climate change or its consequences may be represented directly.⁹ Rather, the challenge to narrative raised by climate change is primarily a formal one: it has to do with developing narrative strategies that are capable of embracing its vast temporal and spatial scale as well as its distributed and abstract causality.

Child focalization is a formal device that enables narrative to encapsulate the vast temporality of climate change, even if the ecological crisis is not evoked at the level of plot and subject matter. Methodologically, my discussion thus involves a close reading that is specifically attuned to the way in which the three authors' formal choices allow them to stage children's agency and simultaneously defamiliarize the reader's understanding of embodiment and nonhuman materiality. As children's agency becomes uncoupled from adult assumptions (and their narrative perspective), it yields novel insight into the entanglement of living bodies and seemingly inanimate matter. These novels deploy a different ratio of child-to-adult focalization: in Tawada's *The Emissary*, we find only short passages focalized by the child protagonist; Cook's *The New Wilderness* combines the two so as to emphasize the discontinuities between a young girl and her mother; while Ammaniti's *Anna* adopts child focalization throughout, with only a few exceptions. This increasing presence of child focalization also justifies the order in which I will approach these works.

To pave the way for the close readings, I will lay out the theoretical framework for my discussion by drawing on, and combining, two scholarly fields that have not engaged in extensive conversation so far: childhood studies and ecocriticism.¹⁰ Within current ecocritical work, I will follow what Erin James has called "econarratology" in foregrounding the formal dimension of literary narrative's engagement with the non-human environment.¹¹

Childhood Studies Meets Econarratology

"At this key moment in the state of the humanities, rethinking the child is both necessary and revolutionary," argues Anna Mae Duane in the introduction to a collection

9. For more on the resistance of climate change to (direct) narrative representation, see Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence*, and Amitav Ghosh's argument in *Great Derangement*. I discuss the formal dimension of narrative's confrontation with the climate crisis in Caracciolo, *Narrating the Mesh*.

10. The keyword here is *extensive*: as with all statements of this type, exceptions are bound to crop up. See, for example, Curry, "Power and Potential."

11. James, *Storyworld Accord*.

that offers a wide range of perspectives from childhood studies.¹² The interdisciplinary field of childhood studies (or, alternatively, children's studies) aims to question assumptions surrounding childhood and explore how these assumptions underlie cultural representations as well as scientific models of human development. These assumptions are sometimes discussed under the heading of "adultism," a term that refers to contemporary society's bias toward adult-centric norms and ways of thinking.¹³ This research program takes issue with an essentializing understanding of childhood, which sees children as inherently vulnerable and reliant on adults for their flourishing. Particularly in the political sphere, children are denied agency and left on the sidelines of the public debate—an adultist perspective that is vigorously resisted by Thunberg and other individuals in the youth climate movement. Without, of course, denying the importance of parental care and community for psychological development, childhood studies brings into view the ambiguities and tensions that surround the figure of the child, which—to quote again from Duane's introduction—raises "uncomfortable questions that complicate the stance that authority is inherently oppressive and that subversion and resistance are unqualified positives."¹⁴

In times of catastrophic climate change, one of the uncomfortable questions raised by the cultural imagination of the child concerns a future that appears fundamentally inscrutable. The climate crisis is also a crisis of science's ability to predict the future with a reasonable degree of certainty.¹⁵ This uncertain futurity has deeply negative psychological consequences for at least those of us, in the academy and the general public, who take climate change seriously. In a *New York Magazine* article, David Wallace-Wells links this climate anxiety directly to the problem of having or raising children: "Among this outwardly conscientious cohort, there is worry about bringing new children into a damaged world, full of suffering, and about 'contributing' to the problem by crowding the climate stage with more players, each a little consumption machine."¹⁶ Wallace-Wells is building on extensive discussions in the media and within the environmental movement on the carbon footprint of childbearing and the dangers of overpopulation.¹⁷ A related question has to do with the practical and intellectual skills that are to be cultivated in children when the institutions on which Western societies are built can no longer be taken for granted.

This imaginary probing of children's attitudes is precisely what child focalization in climate fiction can achieve, thus complicating and even undermining an adultist viewpoint on the future. Of course, because the works I will examine are written by

12. Duane, "Introduction," 8.

13. For discussion, see Wall, "From Childhood Studies to Childism."

14. Duane, "Introduction," 7.

15. See Cooper, "Turbulent Worlds."

16. Wallace-Wells, "Parenting the Climate Change Generation."

17. Ecocritic Greg Garrard puts it baldly: "It is not the world without us that calls for new artistic forms, but the world with *far fewer* of us that we should seek to imagine, and to achieve" ("Worlds without Us," 59).

adults for an adult audience, it would be misleading to claim that their child focalizers are necessarily faithful to children's genuine experience of climate change. However, the narrative device of child focalization may still play an important role in unsettling or "defamiliarizing"—to use a technical term in literary scholarship—certain assumptions about the future that may appear self-evident to an adult audience.¹⁸

Similarly, James Phelan argues that unreliable narrators can elicit "naïve defamiliarization" when a character's evaluation of a situation is perceived by the audience as faulty or limited but nevertheless manages to convey novel insights that would not be available to the audience otherwise.¹⁹ While aligning childhood with naiveté is problematic, the defamiliarizing mechanism identified by Phelan has a good deal in common with how I conceptualize the effects of child focalization in this article. To be clear, child focalization is insufficient to put pressure on adultism in imagining the consequences of climate change: adopting a specific formal device does not guarantee that the stereotypical association of childhood with (for example) vulnerability and lack of self-sufficiency will be successfully or productively challenged. As always in narrative, it is the synergy of formal and stylistic choices and subject matter that shapes meaning.²⁰

Form has an important role to play in this defamiliarizing process, however, and all my case studies integrate—whether in combination with adult focalization or on their own—children's minds at a formal level. This discussion also points to a possible interdisciplinary encounter between childhood studies and the field of "econarratology," in James's coinage, a branch of narrative theory that focuses on the intersection of narrative form and ecocritical issues (including, but not limited to, the climate crisis).²¹ As James and Eric Morel put it in the introduction to a recent edited volume, "Narratives can convey environmental understanding via building blocks such as the organization of time and space, characterization, focalization, description, and narration."²² While the field of econarratology has devoted sustained attention to the question of animal or nonhuman focalizers, child focalization has been largely overlooked, but it does raise a number of unique questions that deserve further scrutiny.²³

Just as climate change confronts us with the discontinuities between spatial scales (the personal, the local, and the global), its temporality is both vast and unpredictable, with present-day global warming reflecting economic processes at work decades or

18. "Defamiliarization" is one of the English translations of Viktor Shklovsky's term *ostraneniye*, which he introduced in his 1917 essay "Art as Technique." For discussion, see Schmid, "Defamiliarization."

19. Phelan, "Estranging Unreliability."

20. In "Proteus in Quotation-Land," Meir Sternberg discusses the interaction of form and ideological substance under the heading of "Proteus Principle," which posits that the same narrative form can convey profoundly different meanings, depending on the style and topic.

21. James, *Storyworld Accord*.

22. James and Morel, "Introduction," 1.

23. For example, Bernaerts et al., "Storyed Lives of Non-Human Narrators"; James, "Nonhuman Fictional Characters"; Weik von Mossner, *Affective Ecologies*, chap. 4.

even centuries ago.²⁴ Given its temporally distributed nature, climate change presents a uniquely intergenerational element, which comes with considerable affective and ethical baggage. Imagining children's perspectives through narrative form can help adult readers decenter their anxieties vis-à-vis a fundamentally uncertain future. This renegotiation of the climate crisis is productive because it reveals the shortcomings of Western binaries—most significantly, the dualistic distinction between the agency of the human (typically male, able-bodied, white, and adult) subject and a passive nonhuman world available for extraction and exploitation.

Child focalization troubles this dividing line, for instance by allowing for transcorporeal connections between the child's body and a supposedly insensate world (in *The Emissary*), by fostering a new, resilient imagination of the landscape (in *The New Wilderness*), or by reenchanting the material objects of consumer culture (in *Anna*). These formal engagements with children's consciousness highlight the need for new concepts of embodiment and materiality to apprehend climate change not just in theory (as many scholars in the environmental humanities have suggested) but also in imaginative experience, which is the specific domain of literary narrative.²⁵ As announced in the introduction, I tackle these texts in an order of increasing distance from adult focalization, which is still the main narrative mode of *The Emissary*, while it is finely counterbalanced by child focalization in *The New Wilderness* and almost completely absent in *Anna*.

"In His Gut He Could Feel Australia": Yoko Tawada's *The Emissary*

The original title of Yoko Tawada's *The Emissary* is *Kentoshi*, an old-fashioned Japanese word that denotes Japan's diplomatic missions to China in the period from the seventh to the ninth centuries. Within the fictional world of Tawada's novel, *Kentoshi* is also the title of a book manuscript—a historical novel—written and later burned by the elderly protagonist, Yoshiro, because "he realized he'd included the names of far too many foreign countries" in the book.²⁶ Indeed, the Japan portrayed by Tawada exists in almost complete isolation from the rest of the world, in a clear commentary on the country's seclusionist foreign policy from the seventeenth century to 1853. Tawada's novel is set in the near future, however, and the ban on foreign words or contacts with the outside world appears to derive from a nuclear catastrophe as well as the end of "the global rat race" (95)—that is, plausibly, the collapse of global capitalism. "Every country has serious problems, so to keep those problems from spreading all around the world, they decided that each country should solve its own problems by itself," we read (42). We find out over the course of the novel that, as the only exception to that isolation, a number

24. In "Scale Critique for the Anthropocene," Derek Woods has offered an influential account of scalar discontinuities and how they shape the climate crisis. I will return to the concept of scale in my reading of *The Emissary*.

25. See, for instance, John Gibson's philosophical account of the epistemic and ethical value of literary fiction in *Fiction and the Weave of Life*.

26. Tawada, *Emissary*, 35.

of “emissaries” (*kentoshi*) are periodically sent abroad, and they are chosen among children. Yoshiro’s great-grandson, Mumei, is eventually selected.

The novel revolves around the relationship between Yoshiro and Mumei. In the world of *The Emissary*, the familiar attributes of older adults and children are inverted: elderly people like Yoshiro are full of vitality, while children are weak, prone to illness, and easily tired. The focalization foregrounds Yoshiro’s mental processes, but periodical shifts to Mumei offer glimpses into the child’s consciousness. Here is an example of a child focalization insert:

Yoshiro happened to see a poster announcing a lecture on the Naumann Mammoth, to be given by a university professor of paleontology at the Cultural Park, and because lectures were a hobby of his, as soon as he got home he wrote Naumann Mammoth on the wall calendar. Mumei stopped in his tracks every time he passed the calendar, blinking furiously, his eyes glued to the words “Naumann Mammoth.” To Mumei, the words themselves were an animal that would start moving if only he stared at it long enough.
(23)

While Yoshiro serves as a focalizing character for most of the quotation, the phrase “to Mumei” introduces the child’s perspective, which blurs the boundary between human language and nonhuman animals. In effect, these ontological boundary crossings are pervasive in the novel: language and material things appear to be interconnected in mysterious ways, challenging the binary distinctions of adult thinking. For instance, we read that “talking about the weather had become very tricky. . . . The minute you said ‘It’s very warm’ you’d be shivering” (105). The weather, like many other aspects of Tawada’s storyworld, eludes prediction and appears to respond to language in a twisted, and possibly ironic, fashion.

More than any other element of the novel, though, it is Mumei’s embodied experience that undercuts the separation between human bodies, nonhuman animals, and the material world. Mumei’s supple body is repeatedly compared to an octopus, a boneless creature capable of remarkable contortions.²⁷ But the powers of Mumei’s embodiment—despite the fragility he shares with the other children—go much further. In another instance of internal focalization, also introduced in the English translation by the phrase “to Mumei,” the child’s interest in geography is transformed into a physical sense of interconnection with the Earth: “To Mumei, the map of the world was starting to look like an x-ray of his own internal organs. On his right side was the American continent, with Eurasia on the left. In his gut he could feel Australia” (122). Remarkable here is the way in which Mumei’s body bridges the gap between the personal and the planetary scale, coming to feel entire continents within the confines of his somatic experience.

27. For instance, “Mumei threw himself on top of a group of boys sitting close together, sprawling out to cover them, trying out all the techniques of his special octopus-fighting method” (Tawada, *Emissary*, 113).

This scale-bridging body that embraces the planetary is, the novel implies, the reason Mumei is chosen to become an emissary.²⁸

Tawada's novel does not question the conventional association between children and vulnerability but, rather, exaggerates it grotesquely: for Mumei, all "the necessities of life came from Great-grandpa" (62). Through this exaggeration, vulnerability comes to signal something quite different, a form of resilience and adaptability that is grounded in a flexible body. Faced with planetary disaster and contamination (the food, we are told repeatedly, is poisoned), the physical malleability of Mumei's body offers a new means of experiencing the planetary as directly implicated in our somatic processes. The child's somatic attunement with the global both disrupts Japan's isolation—when he is chosen to become an emissary—and helps envisage a post-catastrophic future. As Yoshiro puts it, "Mumei's generation might create a new civilization—which they would leave to their elders. From birth Mumei had seemed to possess a mysterious kind of wisdom, a depth that Yoshiro had never seen in a child before" (36). The paradoxical gesture of "leaving a new civilization" to one's elders ties in with the counterintuitive temporality of *The Emissary*, in which intergenerational relations are inverted and thus defamiliarized. Child focalization enables Mumei's "mysterious wisdom" to emerge within the fabric of the storyworld and rewrite the ontology of adult cognition, with its strict binaries of human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate. The elasticity of children's bodies correlates with the blurring of ontological boundaries. Indeed, embodied materiality is central to the novel's engagement with environmental issues: Mumei's embodied connection with the planetary—an instance of what Stacy Alaimo calls "transcorporeality"—channels the scale of the ecological crisis and evokes a possible way forward.²⁹ Children's reliance on the elderly does not deprive them of agency in *The Emissary*; rather, it creates an opportunity for a different, more radical kind of somatic agency on a planetary scale.

"Just Another Kind of Creature": Diane Cook's *The New Wilderness*

Like Mumei, the young protagonist of Diane Cook's *The New Wilderness*, Agnes, grows up in a dystopian city where runaway pollution poses a severe threat to children's health. As a result of climate change and reckless industrialization, the Earth's ecosystems have collapsed. Unlike Mumei, however, Agnes is offered a way out of that predicament: her mother's partner, Glen, who is a professor of human evolution, designs an experimental study of human survival in the only wilderness left on the planet, the titular "New Wilderness." Glen, Agnes, and her mother (Bea) join a group of participants who are transported into the vast Wilderness, where the child quickly recovers her health.

28. Mumei's strange embodiment is reminiscent of Daisy Hildyard's discussion of "the second body," which is a projection of our body onto the scale of planetary phenomena such as climate change (Hildyard, *Second Body*).

29. Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*.

This community receives instructions and regular visits from the Rangers, whose job is to make sure the study is running smoothly and the participants are not breaking the rules. Other than these contacts with the Rangers, the community is left largely on its own in carrying out what the novel refers to as “the work of survival.”³⁰ If the survivalist premise of *The New Wilderness* recalls young adult fiction, such as Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* trilogy, or “weird” fiction, such as Jeff VanderMeer’s *Annihilation* (itself part of a trilogy), the execution is profoundly different: there is little sensationalism, violence, or horror in Cook’s work, which encapsulates the drudgery of technologically unaided living—the long treks in the desert, the frustrations of hunting and crafting usable tools from dead animals, and so on. Death is pervasive in the novel: especially early on, the community’s seemingly careless acceptance of accidental death will make readers uncomfortable and prevent direct identification with the characters. When Thomas dies in a climbing accident, “the Community took a moment to say some nice things about him and console Caroline [his wife], and then they walked on. They didn’t perform many rituals anymore” (22). Even death is, unceremoniously, treated as part of the “work of survival,” and the anticlimactic accidents chronicled by Cook’s novel are a far cry from the mediatized, spectacular violence of *The Hunger Games* or the unsettling encounters of *Annihilation*.

This is not to say that there is no conflict in *The New Wilderness*, but it is first and foremost psychological conflict, among the group members and within each individual’s mind. Bea, Agnes’s mother, embodies these conflicts more than any other character; she is the focalizer of the first part of the novel, titled “The Ballad of Beatrice.” The novel begins with Bea suffering a miscarriage: “The truth was Bea hadn’t wanted the baby. Not here. It would have been wrong to bring her into this world” (4). By “this world,” Bea presumably means the Wilderness, but also the damaged and overpopulated city that the community has left behind. Indeed, despite becoming a proficient survivalist in the Wilderness, Bea never breaks the bond with the world of the city: she remains nostalgically tied to its material comforts and afraid of the psychological changes that the Wilderness demands of the community. At the end of part 1, Bea ponders the map of the Wilderness provided by the Rangers: she “saw all that unknown land, that beige parchment, all that nothing. They would be changed on the other side of it, that much she knew. Not knowing how was only one of the things that scared her” (47). This is the central conflict the novel explores through Bea: her physical adaptation to the “work of survival” does not correlate with psychological adaptation and resilience—a disconnect between the physical and the psychological that inspires Bea’s fears of whatever is “on the other side” (an image that evokes the uncertainty of a climate-changed world).

Overwhelmed by these anxieties, Bea chooses to abandon the Wilderness, the community, and her daughter. At the end of part 3, the group walks by a road, where

30. Cook, *New Wilderness*, 5.

they strike a casual conversation with a truck driver. As soon as the truck starts moving, Bea runs after it and boards the vehicle: “‘Get me’—she panted—‘out of here’” (134). She heads back into the city, seemingly to seek the solace of the known over the many unknowns of the Wilderness. It is at this point that the focalization shifts from mother to daughter: Agnes serves as the focalizing character in parts 4 (“The Ballad of Agnes”) through 7 of the novel, and as the first-person narrator of the epilogue. Bea’s abrupt departure is also where the novel turns into a bildungsroman of sorts, with Agnes becoming increasingly attuned—physically and, unlike her mother, psychologically—to the Wilderness.³¹ Writing in the journal *Child Development*, Suniya S. Luthar, Dante Cicchetti, and Bronwyn Becker argue that resilience—which they gloss as “positive adaptation despite exposure to adversity”—“involves a developmental progression such that new vulnerabilities and/or strengths often emerge with changing life circumstances.”³² While Bea’s adult mind is unable to fully adapt to the Wilderness, the child focalization carefully tracks this “developmental progression” and the resilience that flows from it.

As in *The Emissary* (but in a profoundly different way), the child’s resilience builds on the body. Early on in the novel, we read that “Agnes was in some kind of mimicry stage” (8), imitating her mother’s gestures and the bodily habits of nonhuman animals. When the focalization shifts to Agnes in part 4, this mimicry has turned into an ability to “read” the landscape like no one else in the community: “She felt like an animal of few words but imperative work. She felt like the alpha. With a nod or a snort, the herd followed” (152). Agnes’s becoming-animal—to use Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s terminology—is a radical gesture that transforms, simultaneously, her relationship to the landscape and to the community: the edges of human identity are smoothened into an indistinct “herd” that appears fully at ease in this Wilderness.³³

This is no mere child’s fantasy of communion with the nonhuman world, as the novel makes clear. On the contrary, it is a form of identification with the landscape that ensures the community’s survival, repeatedly steering them away from danger. In *The New Wilderness*, psychological resilience is grounded in the child’s body and in its ability to imitate and adapt to the physical configuration of the landscape: “Walking ahead of the Community, Agnes felt proud to be leading, just another kind of creature on a mass migration. Just creatures finding water the way all creatures must. It wasn’t that she didn’t always feel this way each day they’d been out here. That she was just another animal. But there was something about the scope of what she could see now. How

31. Ursula Kluwick has written about climate fiction as a bildungsroman, but her discussion of the concept differs from the more literal way in which I am using the term here: as she acknowledges explicitly, none of her case studies is “occupied explicitly with youth or the development from youth to maturity” (Kluwick, “Climate Change,” 331).

32. Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker, “Construct of Resilience,” 544.

33. Deleuze and Guattari, “Becoming-Animal.” Agnes’s becoming part of the landscape through animal mimicry is an instance of what we call “blending into the nonhuman” in Caracciolo and Lambert, “Narrative Bodies,” 48.

massive it was" (302). This passage details Agnes's development—her coming of age—as a progression from what one may call local mimicry (being like the nonhuman "creatures finding water") to an understanding of the scale or "scope" of natural phenomena, and of her embeddedness in them. Crucially, this understanding is no mere conceptual or rational apprehension but an expanded form of somatic attunement. It is this uplifting sense of being "just another animal" that represents the main psychological difference between Agnes and her mother, who does become a skilled survivalist but is unable to see herself as part of a more-than-human pattern. In short, Agnes's resilience derives from body-infused knowledge of the Wilderness, and Cook's child focalization plays a central role in exploring its developmental arc. Adaptation to the nonhuman landscape—becoming "part" of it, as the novel puts it multiple times (see, e.g., 303)—is also what makes the openness of the future manageable and tolerable, instead of terrifying.

The Wilderness continues nourishing Agnes's confidence in the future after she has been forcibly transported back to the city by the Rangers. Her bildungsroman completed, Agnes has become a mother, too: in the epilogue, which is narrated in the first person by Agnes, she lives in the city with an adoptive daughter, Fern. But the somatic knowledge of the Wilderness is still with her, and she has successfully imparted it to her daughter, who is "inquisitive as she wanders around [the urban landscape], as though it is just another wilderness to explore. Another part of the map we had yet to unfold. A thing to become part of" (392). It is not that there are no open questions, or anxieties about the future. But these anxieties are allayed by memories of the characters' "home in the Wilderness" (394): Agnes's embodied insight into human-nonhuman connectedness has been uncoupled from physical place and internalized as a tool for navigating the uncertainties of the future.

"Beyond the Magic Wood": Niccolò Ammaniti's *Anna*

In *The New Wilderness*, the combination of adult and child focalization throws into sharp relief Agnes's developmental trajectory as well as the vastly different ways in which the child and her mother experience the future. In Niccolò Ammaniti's *Anna*, by contrast, child focalization is the main narrative mode; only occasional flashbacks distance the viewpoint from the protagonist, a teenager named Anna. This progression also takes a bildungsroman-like form, as we will see, but there is no adult perspective to counterbalance Anna's because her mother is long dead, her only legacy a handwritten notebook with survival instructions for Anna and her younger brother, Astor. In fact, the premise of Ammaniti's postapocalyptic novel is that a deadly virus outbreak has eradicated the world's adult population: only children survive, the virus remaining dormant in them until they turn fourteen (when they also succumb to the disease). *Anna* is set in Sicily, where enough food is left for children to survive by scavenging. Child gangs roam the island, but the portrayal of children's self-rule is overall not as bleak as what emerges, for instance, from William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, a clear source of inspiration for Ammaniti.

Anna's attachment to her brother is a displaced form of parental care, and indeed it is sanctioned by their mother's notebook. The novel begins in a country house where Anna and Astor are living a relatively comfortable life. However, during one of Anna's scavenging expeditions, Astor is kidnapped by a gang of older children. Anna soon discovers that her brother was taken to a former Grand Hotel where children work for a mysterious witch-like figure known as "the Picciridduna," who is said to have a cure for the virus. Helped by a boy, Pietro, Anna manages to rescue her brother. Together with Pietro, the siblings decide that their former house is no longer safe and embark on an arduous journey to the eastern tip of Sicily, where they hope to cross the Strait of Messina and find better living conditions on the continent. Running through this plot is a tension between the stark survivalism of Ammaniti's vision—a position initially shared by Anna—and a sense of mystery or enchantment that Anna comes to embrace in the course of the narrative. There are two conflicting perspectives on matter at work here. Anna's starting position reflects the disenchanting outlook of modernity as Max Weber first discussed it: "there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather . . . one can, in principle, master all things by calculation."³⁴ In this case, the relevant "calculation" points to the imperative of survival, which classifies "things" according to whether they can be useful or not. However, Anna's experiences reveal that resilience in the face of disaster requires going beyond mere "calculation," opening oneself up to the mystery of materiality as formulated by recent New Materialist theories.³⁵ This enchanted materiality opposes the survivalist perspective: it unites all elements of the storyworld, from human bodies (both living and dead) to the nonhuman world that is gradually taking over, filling in the gaps left by a crumbling human society.

The emphasis on materiality emerges, in particular, from Ammaniti's metaphorical choices, which consistently concretize intangible objects such as darkness: "Dull and compact, [the darkness] penetrated every corner, every crevice: your mouth, your nostrils, the pores of your skin."³⁶ Even the sun is brought down to the level of a human-scale, material thing: "The solar dot melted like butter in a black frying pan" (153). Perhaps most strikingly, though, the bond between brother and sister is captured by way of a concrete metaphor that puts them on a continuum with physical entities and events: "She'd grown up with her brother as a tree grows around barbed wire; they'd fused together and were now a single entity" (154). In this way, the metaphorical expressions help close the gap between human subjectivity and nonhuman materiality.³⁷ We should not forget that these metaphors and similes are linked to the child's perspective via internal focalization: the interest in materiality thus points to Anna's "mind style," her distinctive way of experiencing this postapocalyptic predicament.³⁸ In

34. Weber, "Science as Vocation," 139.

35. See, for example, Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*; Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.

36. Ammaniti, *Anna*, 102.

37. On the subject of metaphor and the nonhuman, see Caracciolo, *Narrating the Mesh*, chap. 6.

38. For more on metaphor and mind style, see Semino and Swindlehurst, "Metaphor and Mind Style."

this respect, the focus on materiality goes hand in hand with Anna's mission to care for her brother, providing him with food and shelter—that is, material sustenance and comforts. In this world scarred by death, only material things count: they can make the difference between survival and the fate of the innumerable lifeless bodies scattered across Sicily.

Yet this survivalist mindset is increasingly challenged by the novel. While they are still living in the country house, Anna invents stories to keep her brother away from the dangers of the outside world: "The Outside, beyond the magic wood, was a waste land. No one had survived the wrath of the god Danone. . . . The two of them had the good fortune to live in that wood, which was so hidden away and dense that the god couldn't see into it" (48). Perhaps influenced by a book of fairy tales left behind by her mother, Anna reimagines the bleak reality of postapocalyptic Sicily along the lines of myth. This reenchantment of the world is purely strategic for now: Anna has internalized the adult perspective of care for her brother and knows well that these are "just" stories, that there is nothing beyond life-and-death materiality. However, her life trajectory leads her to embrace, rather than abandon, these childlike fantasies, which turn out to be the only means of maintaining hope in the face of societal collapse and widespread death (including her own looming death at the hands of the virus).

Crucial to Anna's bildungsroman is her relationship with Pietro. When they first meet, Pietro asks Anna if she has seen anywhere a pair of Adidas "Hamburg" trainers. Puzzled, Anna asks why, and Pietro explains that a friend of his who wore these shoes miraculously recovered from the virus. Anna initially dismisses this story as a mere fairy tale. At the end of the novel, however, when Anna and her brother arrive on the continent and discover the same devastation they had seen in Sicily, they recover a pair of Hamburg trainers. In the final scene, Anna and Astor start walking north, wearing one Hamburg shoe each: "Astor stopped, straightened his leg and looked at the shoe. 'What if it doesn't work if you only have one?' Anna took hold of his hand and said: 'It doesn't matter'" (261). Whether fairy tales are real or not does not "matter," Anna has realized. What matters is how they can inspire hope and resilience even as the material world so consistently denies them. Anna thus develops a sort of double vision, which reconciles material care for her brother and the existential payoffs of the world's reenchantment. Instead of discarding the childlike perspective of myth and fairy tales, Anna learns to bring it into a productive tension with a materialist outlook. This realization does not erase the need for care and basic sustenance, as Anna knows well, but infuses them with new significance. While the characters' future remains open and deeply precarious, it is the magical thinking of the shoes somehow "matter-ing" that carries them forward.

Conclusion

The cultural imagination of the ecological crisis is deeply shaped—and in some ways distorted—by adult fears and assumptions. The subject of parental care, which has

been extensively debated in the environmental movement, is perhaps the most salient manifestation of that adultist viewpoint. Parenthood in times of climate change is a worthwhile subject, but I have argued here that there is value in exploring the other side of that debate, by confronting younger generations' experience of the crisis. In today's world, that experience is central to the youth climate movement, but imaginative narratives such as the novels I have examined here provide adult readers with additional tools to move beyond an understanding of children as merely vulnerable individuals to be protected from the worst consequences of climate change (an understanding that is as sensible and well intentioned as it is potentially reductive of the specificities of children's responses to climate change). Even in literature by adults and, largely, for adults, as the novels I have examined here, the evocation of children's experience may help audiences distance themselves from adultist ways of thinking about climate change and grasp the limitations of their conceptual and affective framework—hence the defamiliarization produced by child focalization in these works.

The meanings generated by this operation are diverse: in *The Emissary*, a novel way of experiencing the body comes to the fore, one that puts the child's embodiment in direct contact with global phenomena; *The New Wilderness* suggests that a sense of communion with the more-than-human world may build resilience and acceptance of unstable futurity; similarly, *Anna* presents the reenchantment of a postapocalyptic reality as a necessary step toward a hopeful outlook. Child focalization thus goes hand in hand with an affective trajectory that enriches, complicates, and in some ways even challenges an understanding of the climate crisis shaped by adult anxieties. As my close readings have demonstrated, the three novels resonate with current theoretical work in the environmental humanities while translating these insights into a concrete experience that is deeply bound up with the adoption of a child perspective, through internal focalization.

Formal strategies and the affect-laden imagination of climate change go hand in hand—an important insight from the field of econarratology that promises to enrich scholarly debates on climate or environmental fiction more generally. Of course, a significant caveat is that the child minds staged by these novels are, in themselves, a figment of adult writers' imagination and therefore may not fully live up to the challenge raised by childhood studies—particularly in terms of making children more central to the research process, as coparticipants. While, as I have argued, these authors' creative figuration of child minds does perform an important cultural function by decentering adult readers' perception of an uncertain future, there is certainly more econarratological and ecocritical work to do by studying formal strategies in environmental narratives for and also by younger audiences.³⁹

39. For a step in this direction, see Weik von Mossner, "Vulnerable Lives," which focuses on young adult fiction.

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