

**FROM SAFE HAVENS TO MONSTROUS WORLDS:
THE 'CHILD' IN NARRATIVES OF ENVIRONMENTAL COLLAPSE**

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Abstract:

Children are widely used as emotive symbols of our shared ecological future, evoking concerns for the ‘next generation’ as well as the philosophical stakes and challenges of politically addressing climate change. The child as redeemer anchors the dream of transforming and healing the troubled world and functions as a beacon against the foreclosure of human history.

My doctoral study examines the cultural ubiquity of the ‘child redeemer’ figure in contemporary Western narratives of environmental collapse. Literature and film serve as objects for a theoretical investigation that is informed by post-colonial, critical post-humanist and ecocritical conceptions of childhood, nature and narrative.

Following the work of other scholars of childhood and futurity (Kathryn Bond Stockton, Jack Halberstam, Mari Ruti, José Esteban Muñoz, Claudia Castañeda), I ask how we, as adults, might respond to children in a manner that does not reproduce the old idea of childhood innocence nor allow the adult’s flight of fantasy into redemption or leave the child to his/her ‘own devices’. Can the child exceed his/her metonymic function? What are the possibilities of delaminating the climate change story from the imperatives of a redemptive and sentimental humanism? Specifically, my project addresses the fiction of universality, which continues to thrive in the hothouse of children’s culture and education.

Moving from Clio Barnard’s feature film *The Selfish Giant* (2013) to Zacharias Kunuk/Ian Mauro’s documentary *Qapirangajuq: Inuit Knowledge*

and Climate Change (2010), each of the four chapters in this dissertation is concerned with dramatizing the limits of heroic environmental storytelling modes, which tend to emphasize the individual in isolation and thereby threaten the fragile, collective, slow labor of forging a common world and a post-carbon future.

Heroic reifications and fairy-tale endings may offer consolation, I propose, but they are inadequate to address the social, structural, and ecological crises we currently, and unequally, face as nations and as a species. Shifting towards collective ways of ‘storytelling’ climate change (including queer worldings and native futures), I introduce visionary, intergenerational survival stories that give imaginative form to climate grief and resistance and address the lived and heterogeneous experiences of children in a climate-impacted world.

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INTRODUCTION

The Environmental Imagination

“Addressing climate change means fixing the way we produce energy. But maybe it also means addressing the problems with the way we produce stories.” —Rebecca Solnit (2014)

NOT SO LONG AGO, I spent some time at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. I had come to meet a friend and as I waited on the street, by the museum’s gift shop window, I noticed a display dedicated to a book called *The Family of Man*. The familiar color-gridded cover prompted an onrush of memory. I remembered the first time I fell in love with photography and how this, looking back, was the beginning of my life writing about and alongside pictures.

The Family of Man was the first photography book I ever owned. I was ten and the gift came from a family friend. At some point, my old worn copy went missing but for many years the images remained indelibly imprinted in my memory. Notable for me were the images of children—an array of faces, including some that looked like my own.

Of course, at the time, I did not know about the embattled ideologies of family, innocence and nationalism that accompanied the book and the original exhibition’s reception but I was a worldly ten-year-old—daughter of a former war reporter, raised on international news and the “ambient hum” of the nuclear crisis—so it didn’t take me long to put it together, that the humans (depicted falling in love, playing, dancing, grieving, fighting, sharing a common fate and a correlating life) were meant to represent something

more than themselves.¹ Embedded in the titular family of man, they were there to support a larger narrative about human kinship as prerequisite for planetary ongoingness.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, I had come to *The Family of Man* a half century late. First issued in 1955, a decade after the bloodshed of World War II and during the onset of the Cold War, its emphasis on universal emotions and the “essential oneness of mankind throughout the world” was a response to the general anxieties of a society living under threat of nuclear warfare and haunted by visions of total and certain destruction. By the early 1980s, when I received my copy, these anxieties had waned but not entirely dissipated. The nuclear Doomsday Clock was still ticking somewhere in the background, ranging from semi-audible to strident depending on the shifting tides of international relations.

My cohort came of age just as the shadow of the nuclear age was starting to lift and the specter of ecological collapse was starting to descend. The anxieties of both overlapping conditions seeped into the air, stubborn, imperceptible. If my friends and I felt any of this, it was mostly tacit and abstract.² We were the young fish in David Foster Wallace’s water parable, unconsciously breathing it in, breathing it out. We had yet to learn that “the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are the hardest to see and talk about” (Wallace 2005).

In hindsight it seems possible that my scholarly consciousness and preoccupations

¹ I borrow the term “ambient hum” from Robert Macfarlane who in an article for *The Guardian* titled “Generation Anthropocene: How humans have altered the planet forever” (1 April 2016) writes of the tendency to regard the “ambient hum” of our contemporary biodiversity crisis with indifference or “stuplimity” (i.e. astonishment mingled with boredom). See:

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/01/generation-anthropocene-altered-planet-for-ever>

² If I were to have put words to it I might have said the idea of continuity felt fragile. I was experiencing what Peter Scheldahl calls “the no-future effect.” (“Conditioned to living on the eve of doomsday, we have lost the ability to conceive of a future stretching farther than our own most distant personal goals or responsibilities—our children’s educations, say, as the outside limit” [1991, 1].)

were formed by the age of ten. Raised as I was on apocalyptic scenarios, it seems hardly surprising in retrospect that I devoted my Masters research to the legacy of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki just as I am now dedicating my doctoral research to climate change and the question of environmental posterity.

Over the course of my lifetime, one apocalyptic scenario has replaced another in the mainstream imagination; two different scenes of planetary emergency defined by a shift from warring states to a warming biosphere. From the no-future scenario of red-button annihilation, we now have a scenario where the future is forever diminishing, but never entirely vanishing. In lieu of a singular catastrophic event, collective dread is now tied to more diffuse worries about the unraveling of life on multiple fronts—ecological, social, and economic. The song is still tuned to doom even if the weight and tempo has changed. Or has it changed? In recent years we have seen a return of Cold War nuclear fears. Two dirges now play simultaneously. (Is it any wonder that many of us live with a troubled sense of ongoingness?)

But returning to *The Family of Man*, I revisited the book when I was writing my masters thesis. I opened with the photograph of a Nagasaki child survivor, his face painted with black rain, “riceball in hand, a homemade cloth air-rain hood on his head” (Maclear 1999, 1-2). Exhibited by curator Edward Steichen with the simple, anonymous caption “Nagasaki, Japan,” and placed alongside a group of nine “distressed” human faces, the subject had been neutered of its historical context. The boy was there to embody an abstract statement about helplessness and suffering in a troubled world. I hoped to restore the photo’s (atrocious) specificity by placing it within the frame of my atomic investigation.

As a graduate student I had become aware of the considerable body of cultural criticism surrounding *The Family of Man* exhibition. From Roland Barthes to John Berger to Abigail Solomon-Godeau, the criticism varied in nuance but the primary objections related to the show's 'allness in oneness' thesis. *The Family of Man* was considered—in its essence—to be obfuscating, banal, bogus. In *On Photography*, for example, Susan Sontag accused the curator Edward Steichen of sentimentalism and oversimplification. In her words: “they wished, in the 1950s, to be consoled and distracted by a sentimental humanism... By purporting to show that human beings are born, work, laugh, and die everywhere in the same way, the ‘Family of Man’ systematically denies the determining weight of history—of genuine and historically embedded differences, injustices, and conflicts” (32-33). The dominant tone of sentimentality, in Sontag’s view, inhibited particular forms of questioning. The question, for instance, of what it might mean to seriously address the needs of all humans; needs that upset universal declarations of rights and needs that point to the egregious limits of western humanism.

The criticism of *The Family of Man*, while boisterous and compelling, seems faint in view of the book’s enduring popularity and commercial appeal. A few figures to contemplate: the book’s various editions have sold more than four million copies. (The MoMA version is “the museum’s most popular publication ever with more than 300,000 copies sold.”³) The touring exhibition, the most successful photography show of all time, has been seen by more than 10 million people in 38 countries (traveling under the

³ The museum’s book sales “have endowed an acquisition fund that has allowed MoMA to purchase more than 700 works.” The window display I saw in August 2016 was designed for a special hardcover edition of the book, a facsimile of the original edition, released in 2015 to commemorate the 60th anniversary of its publication. See: http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/10/29/a-family-of-man-reunion/?_r=0

auspices of the U.S. Information Agency) and can now be viewed on permanent display at Clervaux Castle in Luxembourg.⁴

As a cultural product *The Family of Man* continues to engender “a mass of imitators” (Smyth 2015). It has given way to other image-based projects (e.g. Humans of New York) designed to prove that, differences aside, we are all the same. Platforms such as Flickr, Instagram and YouTube have extended this vision of global kinship and affective consensus by providing endless arrangements of consumable and depoliticized humanness, often equating “the formal achievement of empathy on a mass scale with the general project of democracy” (Berlant 1998, 656). If nuclear fear was the great leveler of humanity before, we now have the ‘Anthropocene’.

This dissertation is partly an attempt to account for the enduring influence of sentimental humanism, its recognized and sometimes hidden effects, its sacralization of—and banishment of—certain bodies and stories. I begin with two interrelated questions: How has sentimental humanism shaped the landscape of environmental thought and action, particularly our sense of planetary trouble? And: what is the role and resonance of ‘the child’ within this colonial and reproductive landscape?

Throughout these pages I occasionally use the pronoun “we.” I recognize that there are stakes to writing in this manner. There are dilemmas of writing in a way that obscures positionality. While recognizing this tension, the “we” is intended as a gesture towards congregated and connected thinking. I employ it when I am referring to the object/situation/problem that has *brought us together*. It is not a stable “we,” not a

⁴ See: Dunmall, G. “Double Exposure: photography’s biggest ever show comes back to life.” *The Guardian*. (5 July 2013). <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/jul/05/family-of-man-photography-edward-steichen>

movement towards establishing convergence or consensus, but an effort *to gather together*, in the spirit of study. The “we” acknowledges asymmetries in humanness and the role colonialism plays in instituting it. The “we” both appeals to sentimental humanism as it destabilizes it.

The sentimental mode I adopt at times is self-reflexive—allowing the emotions stirred up by a subject to be interrogated and reflected upon rather than bypassed. I propose that sentimental attention can open new pathways of inquiry so long as it rejects the possibility of unity or closure with respect to a situation. The subject of my critique—a strain of sentimental humanism tied to a particular archive of innocence—has operated, conversely, as an enclosure demanding maximum affective agreement; relying on forms of white nostalgia that atrophy social worlds and foreclose possibility for others.

As a way of thinking through these tensions and questions, and to better illuminate sentimental traditions that use ‘the universal’ to negate difference, it seems somewhat fitting to return once again to that prototype of human familydom—*The Family of Man*—this time focusing on a picture by W. Eugene Smith titled “The Walk to Paradise Garden” (1946).



Image 1: “The Walk to Paradise Garden” by W. Eugene Smith, 1946.

Smith’s photo was the final image in *The Family of Man*, an exhibition that opened in January 1955 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. There were numerous photos of children but this one is perhaps the most expressive of the show’s essentializing and hope-saturated humanism. In the picture we see two very small children—a boy leading a girl out of darkness and into a clearing of light. I am interested in this photo for what it says about childhood and nature and hope and for how it connects to a wider rhetoric about the role of children in transforming a troubled world. The Romantic child

as dreamer, experiencer of the sublime, unsullied by civilization. The child connected to nature intuitively, by mainline. I am also interested in how depictions of ‘Romantic childhood’ gain traction and ceremonial resonance during times of political and existential unease.

I borrow the term ‘ceremonial’ from Leo Braudy who, in a 1998 essay titled “The Genre of Nature,” addressed the role of children and animals in enacting what he calls “ceremonies of innocence.” As Braudy writes, ceremonies of innocence are needed to “restore the natural core of belief, in the world, in the country, and in the self” during moments of crisis (Braudy 296). They embody the desire for a restored innocence, “an untouched and perhaps impossible freshness” (291).

“[T]he turn to sentimental rhetoric at moments of social anxiety constitutes a generic wish for an unconflicted world,” writes Lauren Berlant, in a similar vein. “In this imaginary world the sentimental subject is connected to others who share the same feeling...The politico-sentimental therefore exists paradoxically: it seeks out monumental time, the sphere of dreaming and memory, and translates its idealities into an imaginary realm where agency is somehow unconstrained by the normative conventions of the real” (Berlant 1998: 646).

The Smith image has always struck me as a bombastically sweet image of intergenerational hope—the children ghosted with hyperbolic symbolism, both there and not there in the streaming light, leading us to the bright dawn of a new day. Given its sunny disposition, I was surprised to learn that it emerged during a period of intense personal struggle for Smith. The image has a shadow text, related to Steichen’s curatorial thesis but also to Smith’s postwar trauma and experience of personal rehabilitation.

A quixotic photojournalist of epic and single-minded dedication, known best for his war photographs in LIFE magazine, W. Eugene Smith (1918-1978) was multiply wounded by shell fragments in Okinawa towards the end of World War II. He shipped back to the United States, where he experienced “two painful, helpless years” of recovery and creative stasis while the doctors, slowly and surgically tried to repair him (Smith 1956, 207). In a collection of essays entitled *Art and Artist*, Smith dramatically describes his “emotional and physical crisis,” his depression and bouts of self-loathing, his feeling of being shorn from his creative medium by the weakness of a “mangled left hand” (Smith 1956, 209-211).

One spring day in 1946 (“a warm day of lilt without drag... warm enough to soothe aching parts of my partially mended body”), he resolved to follow his two youngest children into the woods, determined to make a photograph, “determined that it would speak of a gentle moment of spirited purity in contrast to the depraved savagery I had raged against with my war photographs—my last photographs” (208). In Smith’s own words:

We were in two different worlds, for the children were exultant in exploring their new world, and I was desperately trying to regain my powers from a past world... The children were chattering, excitedly rushing off into side paths, or off where there were no paths; rushing wherever either would make a discovery... The children remained unaware of my struggle to control the wracking turbulence of my mind as I pushed against these physical and mental handicaps that were hampering my photographic speech... I began to watch the children more intently, paying greater attention to studying their actions against the settings. Screening the variables, anticipating the juxtapositions of action, of feeling, of emphasis that would best show the rhythm of form and content in a complex interrelationship. And, still, to have it simple in its optical cohesiveness, direct in its message, warm in its meaning.... I let them lead where they would, doing my best not to become lost from them; trying to follow without disrupting their thinking and actions—as if I were not there. They approached a clearing roughly arched by the trees and I became acutely sensitive to the lines forming the scene and to the bright shower of light pouring into the opening and spilling down the path toward us. Pat saw

something in the clearing, he grasped Juanita by the hand and they hurried forward. I dropped a little farther behind the engrossed children, then stopped” (211-217).

As he watches his children wander through the woods, Smith’s memories of Saipan, Iwo Jima and other battlefields arise unbidden—”the still warm corpse of a man, and another of a boy,” human beings caged in a stockade like “haunted, scavenging animals.” The traumas he has witnessed as a war reporter are still viciously fresh in his mind and intercut with the present. He labors to return to the present and compose the scene, which is, manifestly to the reader now, as much about the cruel radiance of what is lost and broken, as it is about two incandescent children walking in the woods. Ignoring the pain shooting “again and again” through his body, he finally clicks the shutter. “I knew the photograph, though not perfect, and however unimportant to the world, had been held.... I was aware that mentally, spiritually, even physically, I had taken a first good stride away from those past two wasted and stifled years” (218).⁵

It is difficult to reconcile this emotionally complicated backstory with an image that feels so mawkishly old-fashioned. To the modern eye, “The Walk to Paradise Garden” reads as little more than sentimental “treacle” or a “valentine’s cliché”.⁶ But for

⁵ I sought to unearth more specific information about the photo’s inclusion in *The Family of Man*. I wondered: was it always named “The walk to paradise garden” or was it, at some point, merely called “Juanita and Patrick”? In other words, at what juncture did the ‘particular’ get lifted into the ‘universal’ one world/one man/one child’ theme of the show? What discussion led to it being used as the closing image for the exhibition? The Center for Creative Photography (University of Arizona) holds the W. Eugene Smith archive including Smith’s own contact sheets, hand-written notes, correspondence and other personal documents. I emailed the director to ask if they might have any record of correspondence between W. Eugene Smith and Edward Steichen (or Steichen’s assistant Wayne Miller*) about the MoMA exhibition. The director, Leslie Squyres, responded with copies of the correspondence I had requested, which made it clear that as of December 31, 1954, the photo remained untitled. Throughout the correspondence, it is referred to simply as the photograph of “your two children”. See: <http://www.creativephotography.org/collections/research-archives>

⁶ In this 2013 *Star Tribune* review of a W. Eugene Smith retrospective in Minneapolis, the writer notes: “Nearly 70 years later, our visual vocabulary has changed, and the kids silhouetted against lacy garden foliage read like a valentine’s cliché. In the aftermath of war, Smith’s sweet sentiment was doubtless appealing, but it tastes like Victorian treacle on the modern tongue.” <http://www.startribune.com/camera-vs-world-a-deep-look-at-a-pioneering-photojournalist/198161851/>

Smith and countless viewers, the photograph carried a redemptive aura—conveying a sense of harmony that, while discontinuous and even broken, was there to be salvaged. In the context of Steichen’s ‘Family of Man’ thesis, the photo offered a collective vision of a nature cure, the promise of a restorative unity with the natural world at a time of internecine conflict. The arch of trees could be viewed as a portal ushering the viewer away from worldly concerns into a peaceable, transcendental clearing. And who better to lead the way to remedy and purification than the white child pilgrim?

Discomfiting territory, perhaps, but as I will argue in this dissertation, the Western world’s prevailing ecological imagination has deep roots in the Romantic pastoral and in the figure of the child redeemer. The story of the adult reconstructing himself in his own ruins, recomposing himself through the composition of a child-centered narrative, recurs again and again.

We may be wise to the narrative trick of the innocent child while continuing to hang onto this projection: as life raft, tincture, warning, summons, reprieve.⁷ To read the work of many environmentalists is to engage repeatedly in stories of awakening or transformation through human descendants.⁸ Again and again, the child delimits the future, incites a voyage of self-examination, and moves the imagination forward past the

⁷ I found an echo of Smith’s photograph and its embrace of a universal redemptive childhood in the dance “On The Nature of Things,” a piece about climate change created by choreographer Karole Armitage in collaboration with Paul Ehrlich, and staged at the American Museum of Natural History in March 2015. *OTNOT* ends with a group of small children pointing upwards to a solitary light, like beacons, one of them lifted up to touch it, with the gesture of a child savior.

⁸ As I write this, I can see on my bookshelf two immediate and thoughtful examples: *Storms of My Grandchildren* by James Hansen (whose grandchildren helped pull him out of his own period of climate paralysis and anxiety) and *The Sense of Wonder* by Rachel Carson (whose baby nephew reminded her of her great sea love and the need to protect the natural world but also all childrens’ “inborn sense of wonder”). It’s not just a cliché that spending time around small people makes you think differently. The challenge is to deflate the ideology of child veneration without dismissing genuine emotions or observations that arise from specific adult-child encounters.

urgencies and bewildering obstacles of the present. The question of how we should care for children is matched only by the question of how children should care for us.

For Smith, who was painfully aware of the fragility of his own dwindled body, the presence of his children offered a transfusion of hope. While the photo does not, in itself, move me—its trope of illumination is simply too overwrought—the story behind the photo does. I am moved by the story of a man struggling with his newly inherited life, a man reduced to a husk of his former self, his pained attempts to overcome the war injuries that bedeviled any attempt at reintegration, his own personal trauma managed and possibly exorcised through this portrait of his daughter Juanita and son Patrick.⁹

Ultimately, the photograph's *pull* does do not hinge on its immanent merit or fixed meaning but on the wider story of how a man (and a public) became enchanted, possessed, released, revived through Smith's children; how these children were haloed by his (and, eventually, a broader public's) emotions; how they became a vessel for his (and the public's) feelings. The nature of these feelings is complicated. As James Kincaid has written, "[T]he child carries for us things we somehow cannot carry for ourselves, sometimes anxieties we want to be divorced from and sometimes pleasures so great we would not, without the child, know how to contain them" (1992, 79).

⁹ Writing of the book *The Family of Man*, photographer Sally Mann offers her own experience of ambivalence: "I know that [it] is controversial for its oversimplification, vulgar worldwide success, and naïve ideological posture, but I am not embarrassed to say that I am still moved by it. As a child, it captivated and enthralled me, I studied every picture, from the opening Wynn Bullock image of the naked child in the ferny forest, to W. Eugene Smith's 'Walk to Paradise Garden' (a print of which I now own). It taught me the rudiments of sexual love, family and community life, of personal and social interactions, strife, and, perhaps most important, of empathic compassion for suffering" (403). From *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs*. NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2015.

Perhaps what moves me most is how much the figural child continues to shoulder, an unjust burden (and a dubious privilege) that includes the weight of narratives that long precede his/her arrival.

To appreciate the full force of this doctrine of innocence and redemption and to establish its troubled historical pedigree, let me briefly introduce a second image, one that bears a compositional resemblance to Smith's "The Walk to Paradise Garden."



Image 2: "Kids in Alleyway" by American photojournalist Robert Natkin, 1950s.

“Kids in Alleyway,” by American photojournalist Robert Natkin (1919-1996), depicts children in early 1950s Chicago. Framed within a normative narrative of black ‘urbanness’, the lighting is similar to Smith’s photograph—backlight from the end of a tunnel. Both images show children from behind, gazed upon, susceptible to the adult’s vision of the future’s unfolding. In this case, however, the *mise-en-scene* is an alleyway captured through the reformer’s lens, a place of undifferentiated poverty and disadvantage.¹⁰ These kids cannot lead or redeem, we might infer, because they are too enmeshed in corporeal survival. In lieu of Smith’s transcendent portal, here we have a boarded-up dead end.

Seen together, these two images limn a key tension that haunts sentimental humanism and the ecological sublime. Put plainly: there is no ‘everychild.’ On the contrary, the emblematic nature child of the 19th and 20th century, indeed the very doctrine of childhood innocence, which emphasized the child’s intimacy with the natural world and resulting purity, was “raced white” and played an integral role in marking ‘nature’ and wilderness as a white space (Bernstein 8). The sacralization, or ‘making sacred’, of some children via their proprietorial contact with the pristine was intimately linked to the desacralization of other children, just as the sacralization of certain ‘charismatic’ lifeforms has delimited, and continues to delimit, the boundaries of what will be loved, and seen as worthy of care.¹¹

¹⁰ Saidiya Hartman addresses the iconography of the tenement alley in an essay titled “The Terrible Beauty of the Slum.” As she writes: “The outsiders and the uplifters fail to capture it, get it right. A typical Negro alley is all they see, blind to the relay of looks and that pangs of desire that unsettle their captions and hint at the possibility of a life bigger than poverty, at the tumult and upheaval that can’t be arrested by the camera.” See: *Brick: A Literary Journal*. 99, Summer, 39-44.

¹¹ José Esteban Muñoz notes, for instance, how a particular colonial landscape has both ignored and allowed for “the dehumanization of improperly environmental actors who are profiled through their lack of proper appreciation of and respect for nature.” As Muñoz remarks: “Writers on environmental racism have highlighted how poor people of color, Indigenous people, and people in the global South are punished and

At issue here is a particular non-transferable story of the natural world and its imagined communities that provides further incentive to think past certain binary impasses and purity discourses (e.g. nature/urban, environmental/anti-environmental), and to avoid what Stephanie LeMenager has called “the fatal rhetoric of the sacred” (107)

As Christina Sharpe so affectingly asks: “What...is the status of those young black and blackened people swept up and gathered under the sign of ‘urban youth?’ Do we understand the phrase ‘urban youth’ and its constitutive parts to be a representational, a geographical, or an ontological category?” (Sharpe 2014, 62).¹² Put another way: how do dominant fantasy formations, reigning figurations of feeling impede the work of imagining a future that does not merely reproduce the norms and violence of the present?¹³

It bears noting that Robert Natkin belonged to a tradition of American photographers who were more willing than most image-makers to complicate the conception of Romantic childhood as it applied to only “a tiny portion of the world’s most privileged and sheltered” children (Higonnet 2008, 17). In her study of photography and conceptions of childhood innocence, Anne Higonnet maintains that

pathologized for their improper engagement with nature/animals, namely, for survival and sustenance rather than recreation or companionship. At the same time, these populations are forced to bear the harmful effects of the extraction of resources, the siting of hazardous facilities, the dumping of toxic wastes, and other forms of environmental violence (2015, 211).”

¹² See also: Ingrid Pollard’s 1987 photo series, “Pastoral Interludes,” a powerful deconstruction of the pastoral imagination and its role in expelling Black people from the English countryside. The photographs feature Pollard, a Black woman, hiking around a rural landscape. As Pollard writes: “it’s as if the Black experience is only lived within an urban environment. I thought I liked the Lake District where I wandered lonely as a Black face in a sea of white. A visit to the countryside is always accompanied by a feeling of unease, dread...” Pollard notes that the romantic and idealized idyll was developed in tandem with England’s involvement in the Atlantic slave trade.

¹³ Who and what is the model future citizen? “Whose subjectivity, whose forms of intimacy and interest, whose bodies and identifications, whose heroic narratives—will direct America’s future” (Berlant 1997, 6). Consider Christina Sharpe’s observation that “Black children are not seen as children and the corral of ‘urban youth’ holds them outside of the category of the child...they are certainly not offered the new world or ways towards imagining it that their, that our, circumstances demand” (Sharpe 2016, 89).

artists such as Diane Arbus, Lewis Hine, Helen Levitt, Dorothea Lange and Sally Mann ventured to show the world “a childhood that deviates, suffers, and struggles” from the norm. In their time, namely the 1940s-1960s, their photographs “were understood as an exception to ideal childhood” (Higonnet 2008, 17).¹⁴



Image 3: “Children with Soap Bubbles, New York City” by Helen Levitt ca. 1945, printed 1970s

My intention here is not to laud certain images and inveigh against others but to note that there were contemporaries of W. Eugene Smith for whom children did not arouse excessive associations with innocence. Helen Levitt, for example, wrestled with visual

¹⁴ These complicated images of childhood did not enter the popular repertoire without controversy. In fact, the debates (or furies) that have surrounded the work of Arbus and Mann are particularly instructive in showing how the contours of childhood are constantly being redrawn. On a related note, Higonnet chronicles the characteristics and contradictions posed by the invention of (what she calls) the ‘Knowing Child.’ Racialized, classed, queer children are often constructed as more knowing, less fragile, and therefore less innocent (2008, 119) and ‘knowing children’ rarely receive the same protective care and consideration accorded to white privileged children. Higonnet makes the case for recasting a child figure that is not totally innocent yet still deserving of adult protection—a child in the process of becoming.

codes that enforced the sentimental hallowing and marginalization of children so popular in photography at the time. She challenged prevailing ideas about children, urban life, and photographic depiction. In her photographs of children at play, for example, one can feel her trying to dodge predictable tropes—what Toni Morrison has elsewhere described as language’s “frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains” (1993: xi); or what Lauren Berlant calls the “conventions, stereotypes, and forms—the diacritics of congealed feeling that characterize the cultural scene of sentimentality” (646).

In an elegant essay on “Child's Play in Helen Levitt's Early Photographs,” Elizabeth Gand puts Levitt’s contribution in context:

Levitt was far from alone in discerning a new salience in the figure of the child. During the 1930s and 1940s, a child mania swept through American culture. A torrent of photographs, paintings, exhibitions, books, movies, and articles made children newly visible as objects of study, ideals of contemplation, and targets of political policy... Whether such popularly circulated pictures celebrate childhood or mourn its betrayal, they trade on culturally sacrosanct notions of children as pure innocents needing shelter. Such notions affirm ideological claims for traditional gender roles, domestic norms, racial homogeneity, and the glorification of “the family.” Levitt’s photographs undercut precisely these reigning myths of the child as an unproblematic personification of innocence and symbol of respectable family and social life (2009).

Levitt demonstrated that one could express concern for the vulnerability of children and particularly those who had been historically discounted on the basis of class and race, that one could tenderly bear witness to the material conditions of their lives, *without* reifying an idea of lost innocence.

The Project

When I look at W. Eugene Smith’s “The Walk to Paradise Garden”, I feel an undercurrent of existential dread that burns beneath the image like a fuse. I see the way

this photograph of Smith's children enabled his own acts of self-definition; the way most images of children tend to serve the desires and needs of adults, rather than the children they purport to represent. I see a tangled web of competing narratives tidied into a reduced and clarified picture.

What does this have to do with representations of children and climate change?

I would suggest, a great deal.

Climate change discourse swirls around emotive representations of the child. "Not only does the figure of the child metonymically represent future generations," writes Adeline Johns-Putra, "its status as the ultimate, even primal subject of protection, shelter, and guardianship means that it readily speaks to contemporary anxieties about whether we are doing enough to protect, shelter, and safeguard—whether, in short, we are caring enough" (2017, 6).

Johns-Putras suggests that in the face of such existential disquiet, the word "devastation" refers not only to the state of the natural environment but also to the loss of what makes "humans humane" (3). In this withered context, the child as redeemer and protector of the planet not only anchors the dream of transforming and healing the troubled world but also functions as a beacon against the foreclosure of 'human history' and 'human goodness' itself.

This dissertation attempts to provide a reading of the ethical possibilities and questions raised by the figural child by turning to cultural narratives of environmental collapse. Film and literature serve as aesthetic objects for a theoretical investigation that will be

informed by post-modern, post-colonial, queer, and ecocritical conceptions of childhood, nature and narrative.

Building upon the work of other scholars of childhood and futurity (Lee Edelman, Jacqueline Rose, James Kincaid, Jack Halberstam, Mari Ruti, José Esteban Muñoz, Claudia Castañeda, Lauren Berlant), my emphasis will be on the limits of reproductive futurism and the adult use of the figural child to both repeat and work through adult conflict and distress about the ‘monstrous world’. I explore, for example, how exhortations to save the Earth, and protect childhood itself, can be made without any pressure to enact national and international policies that might make this remotely possible—a paradox that in itself might illuminate the limits of a sentimental liberal ecology.

From a philosophical, pedagogical and ethical vantage point, I ask how we might respond to children in a manner that does not reproduce the old idea of childhood innocence nor allow the adult’s flight of fantasy into redemption or leave the child to his/her ‘own devices’. Can the child exceed his/her metonymic function? Can we move beyond “a myopic focus on producing (proper) children and thus a (proper) future for humanity” (Out of the Woods Collective, 2015)? What are the possibilities of delaminating the climate change story from the imperatives of a redemptive or reproductive humanism?

In her book *Figurations: Child, Bodies, Worlds*, Claudia Castañeda uses the concept of figuration to explore the material and semiotic practices that bring the figure of the child into being at any particular moment, in any particular location. She notes that it is precisely because the child is a subject in flux, ever growing and changing, never

fixed or complete in itself that s/he is conventionally seen “as a potentiality rather than an actuality, a becoming rather than a being: an entity in the making” (2002, 1). Castañeda’s work provides a framework for my own project. Following Castañeda’s lead, my intention is not to provide an exhaustive taxonomy or close reading of the child’s appearance or discursive construction within discrete cultural texts or domains. My interest is to identify the significance of a figuration “for the making of wider cultural claims” about ‘the future’ and ‘the world’ (8).

Woven throughout this study is the recognition that we stand at an ecological and ontological threshold. We have reached what many activists since 2012 have been calling “Decade Zero” of the climate crisis, i.e. our last chance to get the fossil fuel economy under control before we lock-in to irreversible, runaway climate change. Many of us are, in a sense, engaged in writing an open letter to the future. The nature of this epistle may vary in content and tone—apologia, requiem, self-defense, manifesto, call to arms—but there is a growing awareness that in our actions we will determine what will be bequeathed to our multispecies kin, just as we ourselves are the heirs of innumerable inherited practices and traditions of thought that preceded our arrival.

I say this to acknowledge the welter of emotions and moral challenges and the political force and differential responsibility addressed to us today, as North American adults, alive and breathing during climate change's “decade zero.”

At the same time, I wish to recognize the representational challenges that have shaped our collective environmental imaginary. ‘Climate change’ is so colossal in scale, so difficult to grasp in its dispersed temporality, that there is a strong and understandable impulse to want to temper the potentially dehumanizing character of those time frames.

The representational challenges cannot be overstated. As storytellers, many of us have asked: how can we ‘bring it home’? How can we take vast amounts of material and craft a narrative that feels palpable and affecting? How can we, to echo Rob Nixon, “devise arresting stories, images, and symbols adequate to the pervasive but elusive violence of delayed effects”? (Nixon 2013, 3)

In the face of loss that may feel impersonal or abstractly ambient, Adeline Johns-Putra suggests that “the necessity of care—particularly, care for the people of the future—offers a relatively manageable sphere in which to contemplate the uncontemplatable. The matter of caring for the future provides a focus, the promise of ethical, moral and behavioral ways forward. Indeed, care for the future is implicated in the standard definition of the obvious solution to climate change—sustainable behavior” (Johns-Putra 2017, 5).

The trope of parental or grandparental love, in this context, provides an aperture through which to bring unimaginably large scales down to the human, allowing us to resituate ourselves within otherwise impersonal frames. The appeal to the child, while human-centric, is an appeal to intimacy in the face of distance.

For leading climate scientist James Hansen, the child is also a call to arms. As he writes, “I did not want my grandchildren, someday in the future, to look back and say, ‘Opa understood what was happening, but he did not make it clear’” (Hansen 2009: xii). Hansen frequently includes a photo of his first granddaughter, Sophie, at the beginning of his presentations. In 2015, he enlisted Sophie’s help in a landmark constitutional climate change case against the federal government in the U.S. District Court for the District of Oregon, a lawsuit asserting that “in causing climate change, the federal government has

violated the youngest generation’s constitutional rights to life, liberty, property, as well as failed to protect essential public trust resources.”¹⁵ In 2018, he will publish *Sophie’s Planet*, a collection of letters to his granddaughter and her generation about the fight for environmental justice. For Hansen, it’s evident that Sophie has helped provide “figurative shape to formless threats” (Nixon 2013, 10), generating the emotional and ethical traction necessary to infuse his activism with a dramatic sense of urgency. As Hansen himself states, “If it hadn’t been for my grandchildren and my knowledge of what they would face, I would have stayed focused on the pure science, and not persisted in pointing out its relevance to policy” (2009, xii).¹⁶

From a short-term, strategic point of view, the emotional emphasis on the child as a call to climate action makes rhetorical sense. All movements negotiate among competing storylines, why not use this one? It’s clearly serviceable. It ‘moves’ (certain) people. And, after all, what’s the alternative? We still know too little about the energies that propel and stir people in any given moment of climate reckoning to reject the politics of presentism. We know too little about what ‘incentivizes’ collective action in the form of carbon laws and alternative energy policies. Our entire economic framework (based on infinite and unrestricted growth) is built on denying that future generations have any moral say. In this neoliberal moment, a moment that novelist Junot Diaz has described as “incredibly hostile toward anything that has a logic outside of the market... prejudiced against life-specific values, like social and common good,” it is reasonable that

¹⁵ See: <http://www.ourchildrenstrust.org/us/federal-lawsuit/>

¹⁶ Towards the end of *Storms of my Grandchildren*, Hansen writes: “Over the past few years I thought about our grandchildren and the intergenerational inequity of human-made climate change. Larry King’s comment that ‘nobody cares about fifty years from now’ didn’t seem right—people do care about their children and grandchildren...” (Hansen 2009: 238)

environmentalists would rely on the sentimental appeal of the child.¹⁷ It is hard to relinquish a story, so vernacular and so convivial, that it appears even to appeal to the self-interest of conservatives (whose agendas are embedded in pro-reproductive, white familial, heteronormative ‘values’.)¹⁸

I appreciate that there is an argument to be made in defense of “caring for one’s own” that “at least it’s something, at least it’s a start” (i.e. better to have a meager response than no response.)¹⁹ But I would—and will—argue against such logic. I maintain throughout this dissertation that the forethought involved in “thinking of one’s own children” is hollow and frightening when built on the ground of narrow kinship and human exceptionalism; that its quality of excessive and singular devotion is less an opening than a closed circuit.

As I maintain in chapters to come, careful thought needs to be given to ideas that leave the private form of the family and the primacy of biological “natality” largely unquestioned and intact. Critics ranging from Lee Edelman to Kathryn Bond Stockton to Lauren Berlant compel us to examine how the figure of the child and the image of “childhood” (dependency, innocence, vulnerability, futurity) have often served to limit non-normative identities and foster limited sympathies. Natal lines are finite, easy to

¹⁷ Rejecting the appeal of the child feels heretical. As Berlant notes: “The metacultural ideal of liberal empathy is so embedded in the horizon of ethico-political fantasy that alternative models—for example, those that do not track power in terms of its subjective effects—can seem inhuman, hollow, and irrelevant to the ways people experience optimism and powerlessness in ordinary life... This addiction to the formula of redemption through violent simplification persists with a ‘terrible power’” (Berlant 1998: 655-658).

¹⁸ The focus on emotional incentives, pleas and pressures can be a strategy to unlock climate denial or resistance to questioning the interests of carbon-intensive economic growth but the results are doubtful. Proponents of neoliberalism, for example, may be emotionally swayed to extend their altruism to their own children and grandchildren, even as they remain belligerently opposed to the deep changes and restrictions required for true climate stabilization.

¹⁹ Remarking on the potential and limits of a child-centred environmentalism, the childless novelist Jonathan Franzen writes, sardonically: “Even if I had had kids, it would have been hard work for me to care about the climatic well-being of their children’s children. Not having kids freed me altogether. Not having kids was my last, best line of defense against the likes of Al Gore” (2005, 55).

grasp, and this is perhaps why we have turned to the child as a political ‘cause’ and compass. But upholding the heteronormative family as a central platform for social change promotes a defense of the status quo with its structured injustices. At its most narrow, the idea of the child sustains the reproduction of privilege, the promise of an unbroken chain—or dynasty—of property and relations.

In this project, I shift the emphasis to ask: what are we giving up when we make the figural child the focus of our future-oriented attention and activism? I propose we might be giving up something quite crucial, which has to do with the ability to imagine and encompass more complex, subtle, and lateral relations; to account and be accountable to matters beyond self-same kinship. If having children instills in us a greater stake in the future, one needs to ask which children and what kind of future?²⁰

The kinship narrative is “a calculus,” Christina Sharpe writes in an essay titled “Lose Your Kin,” denouncing the racial politics of kinship structures. It is a “way of sorting oneself and others into categories of those who must be protected and those who are, or soon will be, expendable” (Sharpe 2016). In a review essay for the *New York Review of Books*, physician and writer Marcia Angell echoes this very point in colloquial terms, by acknowledging the shadow side of parental love. “What are the social consequences of this intense love for one’s particular children?” she asks. “Suppose the upper-middle class and the lower layer of the rich didn’t have children. How would they behave?” (2016) She speculates that they would behave more fittingly and ethically.

²⁰ I pose these questions as a reminder that our environmental imaginary—our imaginative infrastructure—has material repercussions. We need to “deprivatize our imaginations” (Fiskio 2017, 103). If environmental studies is not a critique of the neoliberal, neofascist turn, if it does not name modernity as the “socioecological disaster” it continues to be, then it’s sort of worthless (Moten 2015).

Possibly they would pay more attention to the world outside their homes and be more likely to see themselves as active members of a community. They might be more generous toward people less fortunate than themselves. They might even be willing to accept considerably higher tax rates to mitigate inequality, counter global warming, restore our crumbling infrastructure, and expand government services. People will, of course, make the opposite argument. If there is no progeny, why bother? Louis XV supposedly said, “*Après moi le déluge*,” and conceivably that would be the attitude of many people without children. But I don’t think so. I suspect they would regard themselves more as members of a large interdependent group on a very large life raft.

If we are to activate a more capacious and less exclusionary ethic of care, a more generous view of survivalism, it is time to rethink the composition of our “life rafts.” It is time to “Rend the fabric of the kinship narrative. Imagine otherwise. Remake the world” (Sharpe 2016).

Implicit within my project is a call to protect, respect, make and co-create a future for and with children and those most vulnerable—including the constituency of Indigenous children and children in the global periphery who are bearing the brunt of climate impacts, whose pain is all too often naturalized, and who have traditionally been ignored in high-level climate negotiations.²¹ But, beyond and against this, my aim is to widen and proliferate the frame by asking how we might conceive of a community and futurism that would move beyond kin to include not only living and unconceived humans

²¹ For a “child’s rights” perspective on differential climate impacts and the challenges of intergenerational justice and inequality, see: *Challenges Of Climate Change: Children On The Front Line* (NY: United Nations, 2014). See also: Strazdins, L. and Skeat, H. (2011) *Weathering the Future: Climate Change, Children and Young People, and Decision Making* [Report]. Canberra: Australian Research Allian for Children and Youth. The authors note: “Across all countries it is children who are at greater risk from environmental health hazards. Indeed, climate change has been called, by some, the ‘greatest crisis for child health’ (Waterston, 2006). This stems from children’s potentially greater duration of exposure (linked to different behaviour patterns), their greater sensitivity to exposures (because of developing and immature organ systems as well as immature cognitive and emotion regulation systems) and because of their dependence on care givers for appropriate preparedness and response (Ebi and Paulson 2007). They will also have a lifelong exposure to risks (McMichael, Bunyavanich & Epstein, 2005).”

but also non-human others. In addition, I propose the need to reconsider “parental” (or “grandparental”) love as a substitution or surrogate for environmental posterity.

My thinking here owes a debt to Adeline Johns-Putra who provides a solid challenge to “environmentalist parental rhetoric” in an essay on Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*. In her elegant reading of McCarthy’s book, she questions the way the narrative locates the “measure of humanity in the father’s care for his son” and asks whether we can rise above the anxiety of keeping our own children safe (2017).

The danger is that the language of enclosure, the retreat to the small space of the family as a refuge from a world that is threatening, encourages a repertoire of bad impulses including a withdrawal from the commons and the reinforcement of a neoliberal privatization of emotion and care. Of further concern is how a resurgent “new domesticity” (built on putatively progressive, low-impact ideas such as homesteading, homeschooling, and homemaking) has strengthened a culture of self-interest and privatization based on the seemingly benign or ‘neutral’ ideas of family care.

The language of retreat has various iterations—many of them consonant with our hyper-individualized zeitgeist. It can be seen in the stockpiling behavior of ‘preppers’ and ‘doomers,’ in the backwoods retract-ivism of deep ecologists, and in the frightening fear mongering of wall builders and proponents of so-called “separation barriers”.

Similarly, there are various iterations of parental love, some more myopic than others. Putras-John bluntly names one more fortified variant as a “Darwinian brand of parental care—what Donovan Gwinner describes as ‘survivalist insularity’ (153)” that “necessarily implies saving one’s offspring at the expense of others” (2017, 18).

It matters when our stories reinforce chasms of race, class, region, nation, and species—sustaining the comfort of those who benefit from harms committed *often unseen* on the global or local periphery. It matters when human exceptionalism renders us blind to what Marilynne Robinson in her novel *Gilead* calls the “silent and invisible life” (22)—the something in excess of what we can see and know. “It matters,” writes Donna Haraway, “what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories” (Haraway 2016, 12).

We need new stories.

In recent years, Anna Tsing and Donna Haraway have both offered an impetus to rethink care beyond ancestry or genealogy. In her work on the “unruly edges” of imperial space and the European-sponsored plantation system, Anna Tsing provides a nimble critique of “home” as a racialized realm of purity and love, which flourished on a cruel system of slavery and crude extraction.²² Tsing notes that “this kind of family fetish reappeared in mid-twentieth century U.S. mass culture—and once again in our times now—as the United States assumed a global leadership that allowed it to draw from older regimes of colonial culture. Here love is just not expected outside family walls. Within the family, other species can be accepted; pets are models for family devotion. But the model of the loving and beloved pet does not spread love; it holds it tight inside the family.” (Tsing 2012: 141) If a family fetish, under the sign of ‘home’ and colonial ‘settlement’, advanced the destruction of multispecies landscapes and refuges, Tsing’s response is to refuse human (capitalist) domestication schemes. “*Home* is where

²² Colonial havens (eg. plantations) have been foundational to the death worlds of multiple beings. Viewing them as sanctuaries screens us from their violent expulsions and deep exclusions.

dependencies within and among species reach their most stifling,” she reminds us. “For all its hyped pleasure, perhaps this is not the best idea for multi-species life on earth. Consider, instead, the bounteous diversity of roadside margins” (2012: 141).

Summarizing Tsing’s as-yet-unpublished paper “Feral Biologies,” Haraway offers a companion thought: “Anna Tsing argues that the Holocene was the long period when refugia, places of refuge, still existed, even abounded, to sustain reworlding in rich cultural and biological diversity. Perhaps the outrage meriting a name like Anthropocene is about the destruction of places and times of refuge for people and other critters.” Haraway concludes: “I think our job is...to cultivate with each other in every way imaginable epochs to come that can replenish refuge. Right now, the earth is full of refugees, human and not, without refuge” (Haraway 2015, 160).

Donna Haraway’s own project of fostering “durable, multigenerational, non-biogenetic kin-making” asks us to engage in deeper “practices of care across kinds.” As she remarks in a 2016 interview with *Artforum*:

One of the most urgent tasks that we mortal critters have is making kin, not babies. This making kin, both with and among other humans and not humans, should happen in an enduring fashion that can sustain through generations. I propose making kin nongenealogically, which will be an absolute need for the eleven-plus billion humans by the end of this century—and is already terribly important. I’m interested in taking care of the earth in a way that makes multispecies environmental justice the means and not just the goal. So I think of making kin as a way of being really, truly prochild—making babies rare and precious—as opposed to the crazy pronatalist but actually antichild world in which we live. It’s making present the powers of mortal critters on earth in resistance to the anthropocene and capitalocene.

Instead of retreating to a thin vision of parental love or reducing the boundaries of care to the boundaries of home and the domestic, Tsing and Haraway call on us to keep the doors open and the edges unruly. Lest we forget, climate change is not only an

‘intergenerational theft,’ it is the reckless pillaging of life *at every level*—from tiny microbes to the coral reef. These are losses that have intrinsic meaning, not merely meaning in human terms.

In view of the ongoing collapse of social and economic infrastructures, and of the web of life itself, the question becomes: how can we join forces to reconstitute refuges? Or, put another way, how can we “give something that isn’t *us* a chance to survive our appetites?” (Kingsnorth 2013)

What is extinguished when we cling to the life raft of personal and privative identity, and the idea that we can protect ourselves and our kin from the impingements of a hostile environment, is social solidarity and the effort to hold a world in common. As Judith Butler has argued, we live in a world of differential vulnerability and “inevitable interdependency,” the recognition of which could serve as the basis for a global political community and a rejection of the idea that “radical forms of self-sufficiency and unbridled sovereignty” are “an ultimate value” (Butler 2004, xiii). Moving away from the privilege of retreat and self-enclosure offers grounds for solidarity and hope. It is a stand against nihilism, for there is nihilism in seeing the child as a sacred charm and in viewing the ‘home’ as a place of existential consolation or as a safe and sovereign haven in a monstrous world. Just as there is nihilism in the idea that survival can only be achieved by turning one’s back on the suffering of other beings.

We need new, less isolating stories. “[T]here are so many things to love besides one’s own offspring,” writes Rebecca Solnit, “so many things that need love, so much other work love has to do in the world” (2017, 9). Responding to a question about

maternal love and her own decision to remain childless, Arundhati Roy echoes Solnit: “Children make you more selfish. My love is wider” (2017).

Can there be futurity, purpose, hope and care without a call to the child?

In place of a reproductive futurism, I am interested in how we²³ might establish the basis for a non-normative futurity—as an ethical horizon of expanded hospitality that in the words of Mari Ruti: “holds open the future as a space of ever-renewed possibility. This in turn allows us to begin to conceptualize the contours of posthumanist subjectivity, including queer subjectivity, along less nihilistic lines” (2008, 114). Hospitality in the Derridean sense offers a radical (if impossible) model of unconditional giving and welcome, the basis for welcoming unforeseen and uninvited relations and “all newcomers, whoever they may be” (Derrida 2001, 22).²⁴ It means redrafting the story of kinship so that no one and no thing is banished to the “global zone of unbeing” (Serynada 2015).

This is a paradigmatic shift. Temporally, it would require that we imagine ourselves, in Robert Macfarlane’s words as “inhabitants not just of a human lifetime or

²³ An additional note on the pronomial “we,” which I use here not as the western world’s “referent-we” but, rather, in the emancipatory spirit of Sylvia Wynter—i.e. to summon a horizon of humanness as a “praxis” that does not collapse the singularities of our histories and struggles. As Serynada writes, the need to “rewrite the human as species by extricating the full horizon of humanity from its incarceration in Man is urgent” (2015).

²⁴ Derrida puts forward an “unconditional hospitality” which rests above that which is obligatory, juridical, conditional, and which points towards an absolute welcoming, regardless of the risks involved. As Derrida himself expresses:

This unconditional law of hospitality, if such a thing is thinkable, would then be a law without imperative, without order and without duty. A law without law, in short. For if I practice hospitality “*out of duty*” [and not only “*in conforming with duty*”], this hospitality of paying up is no longer an absolute hospitality, it is no longer graciously offered beyond debt and economy, offered to the other, a hospitality invented for the singularity of the new arrival, of the unexpected visitor. (Derrida 2000, 83)

The fact that this project of hospitality is impossible does not make it any less urgent because it is a necessary and radical rethinking of ethics and democracy. By pushing against the limits, Derrida’s radical and “unconditional hospitality” alerts us to our chronic shortcomings and inexpertise in welcoming otherness and the other into our home. This is a source of hope and possibility, however, because the setting of impossible goals adjusts the benchmark for what we may aspire to.

generation, but also of ‘deep time’ – the dizzyingly profound eras of Earth history that extend both behind and ahead of the present.” Politically, it would mean laying “bare some of the complex cross-weaves of vulnerability and culpability that exist between us and other species, as well as between humans now and humans to come” (Macfarlane 2016). This deep view and commitment to ecosystem vitality echoes Aldo Leopold’s long-ago call to consider not only “immediate posterity” but the “Unknown Future, the nature of which is not given us to know” (1923, 1979.)

But how is one to evoke this sense of deep time and this sense of lateral relations when conventions of communication and narrative commitment are embedded in shallow time? How to extend the boundaries of species and feeling through acts of solidarity and storytelling? What pathways can we create that might speak with conceptual richness and emotional energy to our rapidly changing visions of future possibilities?

First Nations concepts of Seven Generations offer one possible pathway—an alternative view of futurity that rejects the nihilism of presentism and the despondency of end-time thinking. This ethos of durational solidarity, which transcends the confines of the ‘here and now,’ was captured by a 19 year old young warrior named Wazhinguda Hornek in 2016. Hornek is from the Ponca Nation in Missouri. In mid-2016, he traveled to Standing Rock, North Dakota, to oppose the Dakota Access Pipeline and to join the active youth council at the Oceti Sakowin Campsite. In a radio interview with CBC, Hornek described himself as part of a continuum that includes those still to come: “It’s awesome to, like, see people my age stand up. You know, see people my age understand that we have a future and we have to live here and look further into the future...I am here

not only for my future seven generations but for yours and yours and yours, you know?"²⁵

Are there other models of time-telling and care-taking, that might help counter the postapocalyptic malaise within climate narratives by activating storytelling in the spirit of planetary “ongoingness” (Haraway 2015, 9)? It is with such questions in mind that I turn to film and literature as a possibility space, in which to explore how our dominant narrative infrastructure might be shifted toward a different looking and feeling future.

Theoretical Approach

My critical approach draws on queer and feminist critique, environmental studies, and critical race/ethnic studies.²⁶ It is predicated on the understanding that climate change cannot be properly apprehended through a universalization of threats and responsibilities. As the novelist and children’s author China Miéville has argued: “We are not all exposed to environmental catastrophe equally. Nor are we all susceptible to environmental vulnerabilities in the same ways.”²⁷ Miéville has joined scholars such as Andreas Malm, Robert Nixon, and Stephanie LeMenager in rejecting what Miéville terms a “spurious *human* totality.” These writers/scholars continue to critique framings of climate change (more recently supported by the conceptual term the ‘Anthropocene’), which represent

²⁵ See “Youth at Standing Rock there for future generations,” CBC Radio, November 20, 2016. The full segment is available at <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/unreserved/something-extraordinary-is-happening-at-standing-rock-1.3850506/youth-at-standing-rock-there-for-future-generations-1.3857371>

²⁶ The focus is on “recovering things and beings that are continually rendered disposable as a result of colonial capitalism and cis-heteropatriarchy” (to borrow the words of Jinhana Haritaworn [2015, 213]). Haritaworn argues for the vital need to “tackle anthropocentrism and dehumanization simultaneously, as relational rather than competing or analogous paradigms” (2015, 213).

²⁷ See: China Miéville’s speech, *The Limits of Utopia*, delivered for the 2014 Earth Day function at the University of Wisconsin’s Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olKLMHqeGDg>

planetary warming as a socially levelling danger to humanity. They argue that climate change marks the exhaustion of modes of environmental politics embedded in a liberal humanist tradition. They call instead for a climate justice model that recognizes structural inequalities and social conflicts. For these scholars, globalizing and abstracting terms such as the ‘Anthropocene’ are, therefore, to be approached warily.²⁸ On the one hand, there is a need to remember that the ecological shift we call climate change is a product of human industry and unregulated capitalist growth. On the other hand, it is important to critique the totality of the “we” that casts “humanity” as a universal species (whether through the lens of vilification or idealization), thus obscuring inequalities central to understanding the current ecological crisis.²⁹

A further limit to the ‘Anthropocene’ narrative, as Indigenous activists from Idle No More to Standing Rock remind us, is that it cannot account for other forms of non-extractive human behaviour and social organization in the past or the present. The ideology of Man vs. Nature endemic to the European tradition, which treated the non-human natural world as unholy other, did not align with how First Nations communities approached natural living spaces. To say this is not to imagine an authentic, pre-contact Indigenous Eden untarnished by conflict or plurality. It is, however, to recognize that this Man/Nature dualism and disconnect was not inherent to ‘human behaviour’ but, rather, had a particular history tied to a Cartesian, Christian, patriarchal and capitalist

²⁸ Others have proposed calling this era the “catastrophozoic” or the “long emergency.” See Amitav Ghosh’s *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.)

²⁹ The ‘we’ is often used in climate change discourse but it is an odd pronoun that in the most general sense assumes a collection of individuals making (or not making) various decisions and possessing various individual intentions. But the ‘we’ tends to ignore disproportionate responsibility—corporations, multinational oil companies, comprador governments, corruption, petro economies, etc. There are huge and powerful political forces that work against restraining carbon use and production. So the question becomes: what is the role for the rest of us—as consumers, as educators, as artists, as activists, as moral and political agents?

mindset that is part of ongoing colonial relations. (Some scholars, such as Andreas Malm, Isabelle Stengers and Donna Haraway, have recently embraced the term “Capitalocene” in an effort to more precisely name the nature and origins of our environmental crisis and the ideological infrastructure of our current petrochemical economy.)³⁰

These acts of naming challenge the model of universal (or ‘race-free’) kinship that has dominated the environmental movement since its inception. In his book *After Nature*, Jedediah Purdy asserts that it is not a coincidence that the movement has remained, for so long, “comfortably mainstream in its constituency and priorities” given its compromised origins (2015, 206). According to Purdy, “the new idea of ecology” arose at a strategic moment in America, promising “a unifying challenge for a divided time.” He notes that in President Nixon’s 1970 State of the Union address, “Nixon argued that environmental responsibility could unite Americans split over race and war” (207). Mainstream environmental discourse, in other words, offered an expedient and familiar appeal to a common humanity at a time of intense national discord. It was geared towards generating simple consensus. “The ecological perspective, like other views of nature,” concludes Purdy, “bears the stamp of the time when it was born” (2015, 208).

My project addresses the limits of mainstream environmentalism and, specifically, the theme of ecological oneness, which stubbornly persists in the hothouse of children’s culture and education. As Clare Bradford notes, “liberal humanist modes of thought”

³⁰ In her essay “Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene (Experimental Futures)” Donna J. Haraway remains ambivalent about the “too-big stories of Capitalism and the Anthropos, both of which invite odd apocalyptic panics and even odder disengaged denunciations rather than attentive practices of thought, love, rage, and care.” She notes: “Both the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene lend themselves too readily to cynicism, defeatism, and self-certain and self-fulfilling predictions, like the ‘game over, too late’ discourse I hear all around me these days, in both expert and popular discourses, in which both technotheocratic geoengineering fixes and wallowing in despair seem to coinfect any possible common imagination” (in Moore 2016, 59).

continue to dominate children's books, which "foreground the concept of self-determining individuals engaged in processes of self-actualization and emphasize what humans have in common across time and space, a paradigm that leaves little space for more historicized and politicized readings" (Bradford 2007, 7). Noel Sturgeon similarly observes that "U.S.-inflected children's cultural forms, sold and consumed around the world, are frequently tales about a global world, a U.S. dream of a common planet and an undifferentiated childhood experience" (Sturgeon 2009, 107). There endures a well-meaning argument that children should be free to belong to, and be beheld by, a notion of 'childness' that transcends all division and conflict. This assimilationist argument assumes that differences can be surmounted or 'overcome' by focusing on underlying commonalities. What is not acknowledged is how children are divisibly shaped by political forces, and in fact by a long history of western culture that has not been accountable to—has even waged ecological/military/racial war upon—the well-being of so many children.

My intent is to trouble this sentimental ecology and to explore how ideas of a universal childhood and the story of 'humanity as an undifferentiated whole' disavow the lived and heterogeneous experiences of children in a climate-impacted world.³¹ (Insofar as 'the child' is at the discursive epicenter of this fantasy of essentialized 'human' values, and a recurrent figure in cultural imaginings of The End, I propose that these homogenizing narratives warrant particular attention.)

What interests me in this dissertation are not so much the apocalyptic stories we

³¹ The pressures of gloss, theatricalization, and flattening accompany intimacy forged on sentimentality. The danger is that the sentimental mode, with its undertow of universalism, supplants non-assimilative emotional and ethical labor that might redress the problems and embarrassments of non-lateral power relations.

tell about climate change. (There will never be a shortage of ‘end time’ narratives. The apocalyptic has long been a bounteous genre of escape.) What interests me, as revealed in the films I have selected, is what I would call ‘broken world’ stories. As Kathryn Schulz writes in an essay on the upsurge in weather related fiction, apocalyptic stories “offer the terrible resolution of ultimate destruction.” The more difficult and necessary stories are those of “partial destruction, displacement, hunger, want, weakness, loss, need”—the stories that imagine ways of living in the world, rather than dying in it. “To weather something,” Schultz remarks, “is, after all, to survive.”³²

Throughout the following chapters, I will be asking: How can we bring the ‘crisis’ of climate change into significance? Can literature and film open a passageway towards signification? Can climate culture move us beyond the twin poles of reassurance and ‘consternation’ (in the sense invoked by Mario Di Paolantonio (2011))?

While I share a critique of the ‘we’ of climate change, I am ultimately committed to holding onto a sense of a community of fate based on the awareness that our futures are intimately related. I am interested in how we might expand our framing definition of who the ‘we’ includes, beyond supremacist narratives of human universality. I am further interested in how ‘we’ might imagine a bond borne of a universality of otherness, as opposed to a sameness founded upon conformity to a European bourgeois ideal of normative human identity (itself founded upon the exclusion of those deemed non-human or not-quite-human). This is not a matter of extending citizenship within a universal ‘Family of Man.’ Rather, I suggest that our task is to oppose the limits and violence embedded in the western liberal category of the “human” and, in so doing, to open the

³² Schultz, K. (2015). “Writers in the Storm: How weather went from symbol to science and back again.” *The New Yorker*. November 25, 105-110.

door to different kinds of humanness and planetary life—a new framing of ‘next generations’ both human and other-than-human.

Chapter Outlines: The Arc of the Dissertation

In Chapter One, “Selfish Giants and Child Redeemers: Refiguring Environmental Hope in Oscar Wilde and Clio Barnard’s *The Selfish Giant*,” I look at Oscar Wilde’s *The Selfish Giant* (1888) and Clio Barnard’s film adaptation of Wilde’s book (2013).

Barnard’s film, set in the post-industrial landscape of Bradford, England, offers child protagonists who unsettle the familiar fantasy of redemption and invite us to think past sentimental and nostalgic arguments for ecological preservation, premised on preserving an unjust world “as it is”. Who is the child redeemer? Where did s/he come from and why has s/he endured? What new avatars might help us navigate a crumbling and unequal world? Barnard’s film depicts (British, white, working class) childhood as a space of knowingness, trouble, grief, and stropiness. Indeed, many of the child figures I will be discussing in this dissertation share this quality of willfulness—some delinquent, destructive, and violent. While it is important not to topple the myth of childhood innocence only to resurrect another myth of childhood agency, I am interested in these moments of refusal and how they point to the limits of a sentimental ecology.

Chapter Two, “Protected or Prepared? Children in a Stormy World,” takes a close look at the issue of introducing children to difficult climate knowledge, and pays particular attention to notions of childhood innocence and maturation that tend to get framed within a utopian/dystopian binary (of “protecting/preparing” children for the messy and monstrous world). I take the question of ‘what shall we tell the children?’ as a

spur for exploring the limits of this binary and turn to the work of Japanese animator Hayao Miyazaki, particularly his film *Ponyo* (2008) to illuminate other possible pathways. What happens when catastrophe meets whimsy in the work of Studio Ghibli? I don't profess to offer easy answers, but rather reflect upon some of the assumptions embedded in contemporary conversations about suitable knowledge while exploring the role fantasy might play in permitting access to truths that are harder to take in realist modes. Instead of a world built on separation and sovereign subjects, Miyazaki models a view of collective life charged with the power and animacy of non-human forces, attuned to damaged histories and future-making potentialities

In Chapter Three, "Something So Broken: Black Care in the Wake of *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012)," I excavate scholarly and popular debates about *Beasts of the Southern Wild* to probe the film's virtues and blindspots: Is *Beasts* a means to symbolize "climate resistance" (Nicholas Mirzoeff) or a naturalizing of slow violence and the poverty/precarity of black lives (Christina Sharpe)? I ask what we might learn from the disunity of response to this film. My intent is to explore how decisions about worth and care are connected to environmental sacrifice zones and the boundaries of publicly recognizable childhood and to suggest the need to attend to the ongoing implications of colonial and racial history. Responding to Christina Sharpe's call for "wake work," I finally consider what care might look like in the face of a troubled and extant politics of care, built on a long history of anti-blackness and white paternalism. However fraught and uncomfortable, I argue, we need care. Care stands against 'neglect' and socially and ecologically eroding acts of inattention.

In the fourth chapter, “Living with the Weather in *Qapirangajuq: Inuit Knowledge and Climate Change (2010)*,” I discuss the ways in which Nunavut-based director Zacharias Kunuk and climate scholar/filmmaker Ian Mauro’s documentary upsets conventional ways of thinking about and ‘storying’ climate change while offering new narrative routes. In lieu of a grand or mythic view, *Qapirangajuq* demonstrates an ethics of granular witnessing and sensory attunement that closely traces the ecological and cultural effects of a warming Arctic. This film challenges the ‘data-based’ epistemologies of wildlife biologists/conservationists (their “fix”) and asks for a fundamental reimagining of intergenerational and interspecies relationships. The result is a work of mourning that defies the depersonalisation or derealisation of death and loss that frequently accompany apocalyptic scenarios.

I conclude this dissertation with “Love and Lifeboating,” a wandering creative text that encompasses my final thoughts on futurity, kinship, and childhood. What imagined communities do we see in the future? How do we conceive of ongoingness? As Stefan Skrimshire asks in his exploration of ‘future ethics’: “How do we create the means to empathise with people we may never meet, in a future we may never inhabit?” (2010, ix)

Conclusion: The walk to a “garden we tend together”

In her 2014 book *On Immunity*, a personal journey into the science and history of immunization, Eula Biss builds towards a central thesis, one that hinges on the idea of mutual interdependence and what it means for us to be social beings tied to an extended family.

While Biss is endlessly eloquent, there is no mistaking this for an easy journey. Biss's fears as a parent, which feed her impulse to protect her own child from the dangers of the world, demonstrate the stakes involved. As her own fears intrude and escalate, the book bifurcates. On the one hand, there is an articulate and intellectual plea for communal safety and, on the other, there is the story of an anxious new mother intent on shielding her son from potential risk. It is to Biss's credit that she explores the consequences of both impulses.

The result is less a pro-vaccine manifesto than a summons to think and act beyond the 'self' and family. Challenging the propensity to value the individual above the social/ecological, Biss argues that our bodies do not belong to us alone, but to a larger social and biological world. On this frayed and vulnerable planet, our task is to protect one another—to proceed, and hopefully endure, *together*. To do this, we need to step out of isolation habits and connect.

Biss's central subject may be immunization but what becomes patently and poignantly clear is that the question of how we will contend with our interdependence, and our vast and messy commons, is fundamental to all aspects of our human and more-than-human futures. Can 'we' resist the urge to fortress ourselves and our kin from the perceived threats of the world? Can 'we' heed the call for communal care and responsibility? How will we frame our interactions with the world?

"What has been done to us," Biss writes, "seems to be, among other things, that we have been made fearful. What will we do with our fear? This strikes me as a central question of both citizenship and motherhood. As mothers, we must somehow square our power with our powerlessness."

Facing her own fear, Biss offers a frame of care that challenges the insular and gated structure of white, heteronormative familial relationships. In lieu of a survivalist rhetoric of love that involves providing protection for ‘ones own’—a life-raft view of survival that can be marshaled to rationalize the most monstrous and anti-communal actions—she invites us to cultivate a more generative and generous survivalism.

It is an appeal built on deep relationality, on giving oneself over to one another, on fostering welfare beyond kinship, and on finding kinship beyond blood kin. “However we choose to think of the social body, we are each other's environment,” concludes Biss. “Immunity is a shared space—a garden we tend together” (2014).

The private and paradisiacal garden as a model of care and consolation is unsustainable. In recent years, as nativism and xenophobia have escalated throughout Europe and North America, we have witnessed a reversion to the ‘protecting your village’ mentality of the Dark Ages. We have watched unabashed racism erupt in public life. We have seen American and European governments treat refugees, many of whom have been displaced by climate events such as extreme drought, as a menacing invasion force. (I began writing this dissertation in the shocking and dismal aftermath of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, amid the rise of apocalyptic populism, as the world reeled and wondered what policies a Trump Administration would champion.)

It merits exploring how these “surface tremors” of hostility are tied to “deeper tectonics” and histories of homemaking, exclusion and othering (to borrow Marilynne Robinson’s words [2016]). It merits asking how safe havens contract when conditions are most dire. As Tariq Ali notes, we are not living in a time of “plentiful social democracy” but, rather, a time of increased precarity and uncertainty: “It’s when people feel that

things are not working out for them, that their earnings are meager and that the level of inequality is too high, that they come to feel: Given how bad things are, why should we share what little we have with anyone? (2016, 241)”



Image 4: Cover image from *The Moomins and the Great Flood* by Tove Jansson (1945).

“What will we do with our fear?”

In her picture book *The Moomins and The Great Flood*, originally published in Finland in 1945, Tove Jansson offers one possible response. The Moomins are refugees from human civilization and their father Moominpappa has disappeared. Full of fear and worry, Moominmamma and Moomintroll set off to look for him.

The family bond that unites the Moomin pair is deep, but it is also open-ended, reaching beyond genealogy or ancestry. Disparate creatures, estranged from the world

and brought together by the devastation of a great flood, are welcomed into the fold. Sniff joins the family. Tulippa finds a home in a lighthouse, guiding other lost creatures to safety. The Hemulens and Hattifatteners are also represented as kindred spirits in the Moomin world.

Given the tumultuous setting, I was not surprised to learn that the idea for the Moomins came to Tove Jansson during World War II. "It was the winter of war, in 1939," she writes in the books' introduction, "my work stood still; it felt completely pointless to try to create pictures. Perhaps it was understandable that I suddenly felt an urge to write down something that was to begin with 'Once upon a time'. What followed had to be a fairytale – that was inevitable – but I excused myself by avoiding princes, princesses and small children."

In other words, the Moomins—creatures forced to flee their homes—were born of Jansson's anxiety and distress at the state of the world, a world, not incidentally, in the grip of racial hatred and far-right populism.³³ What feels significant is how she found solace and hope in imagining a multifarious community.³⁴ What feels emboldening is the idea that art can be a way forward through despair.

The Moomins and the Great Flood may be a story about a terrible disaster but it is also a story about the formation of an extended family where misfits and orphans are always welcome, where “making kin and making kind,” in the sense Donna Haraway has proposed, can “stretch the imagination and can change the story” (2016B, 103).

³³ Note how Jansson’s despair at the futility of creating pictures feels hauntingly similar to W. Eugene Smith’s own stated anguish or post-war ‘creative block’.

³⁴ Jansson’s embrace of non-nuclear relations—shaped by her identity as a lesbian, raised by artists in a bohemian household—feels shockingly prophetic and contemporary.

In a climate of fear and grief, when a sense of safety feels most precarious, Tove Jansson shows that there are moments of refuge to be found in generosity, in the willingness to make homes and open them to those who need them, particularly those most targeted, those most vulnerable. Survival is not cocooning ourselves with our friends and family. We must pitch a large tent. Relational care is not superfluous to the Moomin condition but intrinsic to it.

If there is a ‘takeaway’ lesson from the Moomin stories it is that closed system thinking cannot help us. Rather than retreat into a private world of grief, the Moomins treat their vulnerability as an open “window” (Haraway 224). Faced with ecological disasters, brutal wars, and the threat of destruction looming over the future of their world, the Moomins’ insistent openness and enduring hospitality speak to a primary concern that animates this dissertation, chiefly my belief that we need to rethink and broaden—politically, imaginatively, philosophically—practices of care within and beyond the family sphere.

As a children’s author, I have great faith in my community of co-creators. I believe wholeheartedly in the power of art to reenvision the possible. To conceive of the world “*as if it were other than it is,*” Amitav Ghosh reminds us in *The Great Derangement*, is the great project of fiction. It is also the great project of reaching toward a common world that does not empty the individual (human, species) of her specificity.

“To imagine other forms of human existence,” writes Ghosh, “is exactly the challenge that is posed by the climate crisis: for if there is any one thing that global warming has made perfectly clear it is that to think about the world only as it is amounts

to a formula for collective suicide. We need, rather, to envision what it might be” (2016, 128).

In the following chapters I invite the reader to enter the dark woods of a reimagined community, a community that constantly tests and reconfigures the range of ‘us’. With the Moomins as inspiration, I beckon stories that model interdependence; that nurture human and non-human diversity; that foster a sense of welfare beyond kinship and self-interest. The films and texts I discuss offer inventive pathways and fresh scenarios for mourning, acting, and imagining the future. Where will we go? “What will we do with our fear?” How will we enact our hope?

We are implicated in this mess differently, but we can choose to be in it, fighting and flourishing together.

CHAPTER ONE

Selfish Giants and Child Redeemers: Refiguring Environmental Hope in Oscar Wilde's and Clio Barnard's *The Selfish Giant*

"[T]he Child as futurity's emblem must die...the future is mere repetition and just as lethal as the past." —Lee Edelman (2004, 31)

"The child redeemer has become the adorable symbol of society's self-deception, a means of foisting the mission of our own liberation upon those the least able to effect it." —Madeleine Grumet (1988, 155-56)

WHEN I WAS FIVE and a whirling dervish, living in England, my great Aunt Kenie frequently read to me. The story I remember most, the one that sent me into a silent and becalming reverie was *The Selfish Giant* by Oscar Wilde. Even then, it had a holy quality to it, streaming its message like the light that poured through the stained-glass windows at my church-housed nursery school.

Originally published in the late-Victorian period, *The Selfish Giant* is the tale of a cruel and miserable giant who walls off his blossom-filled garden to stop the children from playing there.³⁵ In the absence of children, the once beautiful and communal garden falls into a bleak and perpetual winter: the Giant has literally brought on anthropogenic climate change and crop failure through his selfishness.³⁶ The years pass until one day the children discover a way to sneak back through a hole in the wall. As the children return, so does a generous blossom-filled spring and a mysterious child, whose endearing struggle to climb a tree melts the Giant's frozen heart. ("I will put that poor little boy on the top of the tree, and then I will knock down the wall, and my garden shall be the children's playground for ever and ever.") Following his Scrooge-like conversion, the Giant reaches a contented old age, until finally, the little boy appears again after having

³⁵ One of five tales published in *The Happy Prince and Other Stories* in May 1888.

³⁶ As he declares: "My own garden is my own garden... any one can understand that, and I will allow nobody to play in it but myself."

disappeared without a trace. Now revealed to be the Christ-child with stigmata on his hands and feet—or what he calls “the wounds of love”—the boy has come to escort the reformed Giant to Paradise.

This is a beautiful and very sad fable and, although I am wary of its Christian symbolic overlay and its racial coding of white innocence, the tale captures how an unthinking and ruthless adult world can intrude on a childhood one, with devastating effects. The Giant can be read as a symbol of the adult’s immense and overwhelming powers over children and the non-human natural world and, therefore, also as a tale of disrupted refuge and, eventually, restored ecological balance. It is a story that invites re-readings (and re-tellings) not least because of the redemptive child figure.

In this chapter, I discuss Oscar Wilde’s *The Selfish Giant* (1888) and Clio Barnard’s film adaptation of Wilde’s book (2013) to explore how stories of lost and broken worlds have been tied to hopes about the redemptive possibilities of a new generation. I historicize the idea of children as environmental stewards of an imagined planetary future and question our “investment in the image of the child...as defence against loss of significance in the world” (Lebeau 179). The figure of the child redeemer recurs in literary and cinematic narratives of environmental collapse. My intent is to examine and account for the strategic and rhetorical power of this romantic figure, asking how it is used and what other ideas it makes possible and impossible. Who is this child who figures redemption and hope? Where did s/he come from and why has s/he endured? What publics and futures are enabled and which are foreclosed by this figure?

In contrast to Wilde’s original story, Clio Barnard’s film adaptation, which is set in the post-industrial landscape of Bradford, England, offers child protagonists who

unsettle the familiar fantasy of redemption and invite us to think past sentimental and nostalgic arguments for ecological preservation premised on preserving an unjust world “as it is”. In counterpoint to Wilde’s vision of a restored garden, Barnard brings into view the brutal limits of a sentimental ecology in a place of deep precarity and dirty fuel infrastructure. This 2013 film complicates tropes of racial innocence by depicting British, white, working class childhood as a space of knowingness, trouble, and grief. It is a grief borne of parental and state abandonment where children are forced to assume adult roles and responsibilities and where the virtues of innocence and moral purity normally associated with white childhood are unsettled.

It is my hope that this exploration will not be regarded as simply an effort to topple the myth of childhood innocence and replace it with another myth of childhood agency. More interesting to me here is to explore how moments of figural negotiation and refusal dramatize the limits of *all* heroic reifications, which tend to emphasize the individual in isolation and thereby threaten the fragile, collective, slow labor of forging a common world and a post-carbon future.

Barnard’s adaptation offers an opportunity to reflect on how we figure hope in a post-saviour society. In my view the film poses two very provocative and important questions: How is redemption achieved in a world without Christ or a child redeemer, and is redemption possible in a world of gross economic inequality and ecological collapse?

In the first part of the essay I comment briefly on the child redeemer as concept, unpacking its history and its far-from-innocent implications. In the latter part of the chapter, I link the use of the child redeemer with messianic dreams of an easy climate

solution and point to the parallels between child redeemers and the stories that coalesce around another saviour figure: the “ecological Indian” of environmentalist discourses. I ask how stories of simple fixes and unearned salvation detract from the hard work of understanding the ongoing, asymmetrical, and often occluded violence of environmental attrition and dispossession.

I conclude with a brief discussion of Hannah Arendt’s ‘natality’ as a departure point for rethinking the ‘child’ and ‘future’ beyond narrow ideas of saviours, salvation and reproductive continuance. Arendt offers a different figure for redemptive futurity by emphasizing both the power and fragility of children. It is a move toward hope, one that must be earned by rejecting easy affective imagery and which is built on a commitment to forge affiliations beyond what is immediately present and self-serving to co-create a future with those others whose futures have been overwhelmed by the exigencies of survival in the present.

The challenge traced in this chapter is how to shift the individualistic and optimistic focus of salvation and redemption narratives to the question of how we might consider and enact “collaborative survival in precarious times” (Tsing 2). The world in the current context needs visionary, intergenerational survival stories that give imaginative form to climate grief and resistance. Stories of individual heroism and fairy-tale endings may offer consolation, but they are inadequate to address the social, structural, and ecological crises we currently, and unequally, face.

The Child Redeemer

Drenched in Christian symbolism, the Christ child may be too mawkish and Victorian for our modern secular tastes. Yet arising from this figure has been a secularized cousin who is not so easily dismissible and who continues to hold a firm place in our arts, literature and lives. From Tiny Tim (*A Christmas Carol*, 1843) to Scout Finch (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, 1960) to Hiro Hamada (*Big Hero 6*, 2014), the child hero has served as a symbol of an aspirant social conscience. As Madeleine Grumet writes in her book *Bitter Milk*:

The vision of the child leading and healing a troubled world has never left us. We meet it regularly in our assumption that by educating our children we are preparing ‘tomorrow’s leaders,’ an epithet that obligates the next generation to redeem us and the world. Isaiah’s understanding that the child can only be as innocent as the world that welcomes him is lost to us as we burden our children with an impossible task. (Grumet 153-54)

In Grumet’s view, “the child” has been positioned to serve our narrative needs.³⁷ Through art and literature, and through the rhetoric of education, the child has played the role of transhistorical figure of justice, safekeeper of the future and conduit to a prelapsarian past. In Jacqueline Rose’s words, we have invested in the child as “the site of a lost truth” (Rose 43). In so doing, we have bestowed upon children what might be called *a terrible nobility*—a nobility that finds a parallel in the literary stock character of the ‘noble savage’, the romanticized outsider uncorrupted by civilization— that similarly symbolizes the possibility of reviving a more innocent and pastoral past.³⁸

³⁷ This is a view shared by such scholars as Jacqueline Rose (in *The Case of Peter Pan or the Impossibility of Children's*) and James Kincaid (in *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture*).

³⁸ It is useful to explore how the figure of the noble savage overlaps with the figure of the child redeemer and how both have served as containers of (colonial, western) guilt. Novelist Michael Chabon touches upon this when he writes: “As the national feeling of guilt over the extermination of the Indians led to the creation of a kind of cult of the Indian, so our children have become cult objects to us, too precious to be risked. At the same time they have become fetishes, the objects of an unhealthy and diseased fixation” (Chabon 2009).

From a nostalgic adult perspective, childhood is zoned as a time and place outside the culture in which it is produced, “connected to romantic notions of preindustrial, pastoral values separate from the world of market capitalism” (Spigel 56).³⁹ As a spiritual guide, the child redeemer offers a model of “honest” and “old-fashioned” values such as love, trust, and perseverance while also restoring lost hopes of a re-communion with the natural world. Madeleine Grumet, citing the work of historian Bernard Wishy, refers to Huck Finn as “the child redeemer par excellence, menaced by civilization, fighting to resist its evil lures by escaping to the river” (Grumet 156).⁴⁰

Wishy, in turn, has explored the ways in which this figure was constructed in the United States and the imaginative uses this presence served. He notes that between 1860 and 1900, the prevailing American conception of the child in literary, religious and social life shifted from a view of the child as “redeemable” (i.e. in need of conversion and transformation) to a view of “the child as redeemer” of the new republic (1972). Amid the flux and uncertainty of the post-Civil War period, the onset of industrial revolution and the rise of consumer capitalism, the child stood as a corrective against the sins and excesses of the republic.⁴¹ Seen as a symbol of a lost Arcadian America, the child could be seen as compass, affective valve, even as a form of exculpation, while allowing the business of “progress” to proceed as usual. That this innocent figure “emerged from the rubble of the Civil War to save Americans from the pluralism of urban industrial life”

³⁹ Lynn Spigel (1999, 56) has discussed how images of international childhood and, specifically, the “Third World child” reassert this discourse of a primitive yet ‘pure’ nature.

⁴⁰ For a contemporary corollary, see: William Giraldi’s “Splendid Visions,” a meditation on the childhood sublime. <https://orionmagazine.org/article/splendid-visions/>

⁴¹ From 1870 onwards, “the sentimental notion that somehow it is better to be a child than an adult, that the best standards of life are those of naïve and innocent children becomes an increasingly powerful theme in American culture” (Wishy 85).

should alert us to the racialized and gendered ideologies that continue to inform and haunt notions of the child hero into the present day (Grumet 156).

That “the grid of literary forms and conventions” that came to shape the dominant narrative imagination sprang up precisely during “that period when the accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere was rewriting the destiny of the earth” provides further food for thought (Ghosh 7). As scholars, we need to expose and better understand the stories and tropes that have helped define the present moment.

My curiosity about the literary uses and origins of the child redeemer figure relates to what gets ignited, flattened, and left out. The danger is not that we, as writers and critics, have poured so much into this figural vessel but that in doing so we have displaced other stories. Narratives of moral awakening through children may seem loving and protective (and I am not discounting the complex pull behind our desires to elevate the child), but these narratives also harbor an under-discussed violence. By ascribing a facile naiveté and a pre-politicized subjectivity to children, children are ennobled yet robbed of social and emotional complexity. These are not, after all, stories of children facing *their own fears* or being audacious for the sake of *their own survival*. The child redeemer story is the story of *adult fears and survival*—a mirror of adult egoism and need for absolution—projected onto the child cipher. What Lisa Farley refers to as “the ‘adult use’ of the child to both repeat and work through conflict” has endless permutations and expressions (2015). Thus, for example, we may look to the child to express the genuine, unaffected horror of which we (grownups) no longer seem capable. We may turn to the child to reveal our better more vulnerable and impressionable selves.

What troubles is the emergence of an affective economy in which the desires and needs of the adult take precedence.

While it might seem preferable to be regarded as noble rather than ignoble—better to be sanctified than grossly devalued as a non-entity, incomplete, a non-citizen (as children have been and continue to be)—there is an instrumental logic at work when the child is made an instrument of innocence or a template of virtue. “[C]hildren can be most anything, other than themselves,” writes Michael Cobb. “And because they are pressured to do the work of placeholders for so much political, cultural, affective activity, they are everywhere, and they’re very important” (quoted in Gilbert, 11). Nowhere is this more apparent than in discussions of our shared ecological future where children are bathed in a sentimental light; their simple presence (in films, books, ads, campaigns) serving as a gentle indictment of the society and world in which they live.

The love of children is complicated. As Jen Gilbert notes, the narratives we create of childhood and “the child” are symptomatic of, and cannot be extricated from, “adults’ hopes, wishes, disappointments, aggressions, and longings. In this position, ‘the child’ bears the burden of representing not only politics and the possibility of the future, as Lee Edelman (2004) forcefully argues, but the vulnerable origins of our humanity” (Gilbert 8).

It is manifestly possible, in this sense, to grant children totemic status, to use them symbolically in lovely stories, without actually loving them at all, without even liking them.⁴² (“As adults, I think we can admit we do not always love children ... Sometimes

⁴² James Kincaid, on the elevation of children in literature, writes: “The child is that which we are not but almost are, that which we yearn for so fiercely we almost resent it, that which we thought we saw in the mirror and almost wanted to possess yet feared we might. The child is the embodiment of desire and also its negation” (Kincaid 1992: 7).

we are afraid of them, and sometimes we hate how vulnerable they are,” writes essayist and former teacher Eula Biss, expressing an unspoken cultural ambivalence [2011, 45]. “The idea of childhood is not to be confused with affection for children,” writes Philippe Ariès in his landmark study *Centuries of Childhood* [1962, 128].)

In *Raised in Captivity*, Lucia Hodgson comments on the hostility she observed from adults and media during her investigation into the rights and welfare of children. Rather than voice sympathy towards children, many expressed exasperation at their traumas. “These attitudes surprised me,” she notes, “not because I am naïve about the existence of ignorance and cruelty in our culture, but because I observed them alongside pro-child sentiment and genuine concern about the state of children’s welfare in the United States” (3). Grumet further argues that if we better loved and liked actual children we would not thrust upon them such an impossible task.⁴³ We would not ask them to fix the world we have created. We would not ask this because it is not only an impossible task, but it is also a selfish one. Their powers are not superhuman. They are not all seeing. At very best, they have been made aware of injustices we have chosen to ignore.⁴⁴

Drawing on Philippe Ariès’s work, Grumet has challenged the way popular culture has both elevated and infantilized the child in equal measure. She wonders how a child who has been rendered innocent and impotent, a child raised in a youth culture

⁴³ Of course, children don’t buy it. Based on my personal experience as a children’s author and touring writer, I will say children don’t buy stories that put them on pretty pedestals. They gravitate instead to the literature of ignoble and ‘difficult’ children created by such iconoclasts as Maurice Sendak, William Steig and Tomi Ungerer who have publicly insisted that the dream of perfect order and harmony is not the child’s; who have dared to show worlds of willful and woeful children. I am not making a counter-claim about the essential nature of children but merely pointing out the need for more complex and contradictory representations.

⁴⁴ A few articles in the British press speak to the ambivalence that greets the eco-minded child or child exhorter who takes lessons home in hopes of re-educating their household (to, for example, recycle, conserve energy) with so-called “pester power.” For a particularly inflammatory take, read: “As Orwell warned, children now spy on adults” by Brendan O’Neill <http://www.spectator.co.uk/2008/11/as-orwell-warned-children-now-spy-on-adults/>

based on "interminable adolescence" and implicit condescension could possibly be expected to flourish—let alone lead the world. As Grumet concludes, with a healthy sense of irony, we have withheld from “the very persons appointed to save society the social skills and knowledge the task demanded” (Grumet 155).

I believe it is worth asking about the impossible cultural and political work “the child” is asked to do, what it means to play the role of ‘humanity’s last and future hope,’ and whether it is possible to be both innocent and determined, helpless and helpful, unworldly yet world-saving. How does the emphasis on symbolic gestures (*The Selfish Giant*) and individual pluck (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*) guide ‘real children’ away from considering the purposeful collective efforts and social solidarity required for creating a livable and meaningful future, a future that does not merely reproduce the world “as it is”? How does the dream of the child redeemer enable adult passivity and an abdication of responsibility to help makes things better for those to come? For what is ultimately veiled by this fantasy figure is the fact that adults have acted and continue to act against the interests of future generations. As Patricia Yaeger (2013) plainly states, “We should have created a planet where children can be safe, but we have not” (para. 7).

Oscar Wilde’s story offers an opportunity to consider these questions and the symbolic purchase and ubiquity of the redemptive child in narratives of environmental/social collapse.

Revisiting Oscar Wilde’s *The Selfish Giant*

I still have my turquoise-blue paperback edition of *The Selfish Giant*, illustrated by Herbert Danska in his singular moody and expressive drawing style. I can still recall

being spellbound by the story's mature tone, the descriptions of a giant gently tamed by the children he once terrorized, not to mention the tale's final "death" scene, which, for a child otherwise raised on Richard Scarry and Dr. Seuss, carried the allure of the forbidden topic, of taboos being broken.

It is a moralistic tale, illustrative of the Victorian predilection to preach, and yet its compactness and the spareness with which Wilde wrote it, somehow tempers its cloying elements. If one redacts the overt Christian symbolism, one is left with a basic parable of selfishness—what Wilde himself described in 1888 as “an attempt to treat a tragic modern problem in a form that aims at delicacy and imaginative treatment” (Hart-Davis 221). Some critics have wondered whether the story's religious motifs were, in fact, that important to Wilde. As Claire Armitstead asks, “[i]s it possible that he just liked the melodrama of mortal wounding – whether involving a little boy's hands, or the breast of a nightingale which (in “The Nightingale and the Rose”) impales itself on a thorn to dye white roses red for a lovelorn suitor?” (2015)

It is notable that the nature of the giant's selfishness is open to interpretation. For those of a socialist persuasion, Wilde's story offers a fairly direct critique of the hoarding of private property and resources. Jeanette Winterson (2013) proposes that “Wilde's Giant is both fairytale giant and Victorian industrialist. Wilde hated the hoarding and excesses of his epoch's materialism...his whole endeavour, his cult of art and beauty, was a fight against the coarsening of the soul” (para. 19). While Wilde was not an active socialist, he was publicly sympathetic to its figures and tenets. His famous essay *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, first published in 1890 (a mere two years after “The Selfish Giant”) offers a paean to “the abolition of private property” and a future where nobody

“will waste his life in accumulating things, and the symbols for things. One will live” (2001, 133). From this perspective, then, the resurrected garden might evoke a Utopian dream of collectivism—a neverland of shared plenitude and pleasure.

For those reading the story in the context of late nineteenth-century Irish politics, the giant can be seen as the owner of the “Big House” and the children as disenfranchised (Catholic) peasants (Killeen 2007, 63). From a contemporary vantage point, and in the context of this chapter, the story can also be read through an ecological lens, namely as a parable about human-centric greed and climate change. By putting walls around life, the Giant ineluctably transforms the environment and alters the seasons.

While interpretations vary, the story endures because it follows an easy redemptive arc. When the Giant walls his Edenic garden off from playful children, when it withers in permanent winter, we are offered direct hope and deliverance in the form of a child saviour. It is a comfortable and encouraging story because it tells us with ecclesiastical certainty that no matter how miserly and desolate the world becomes, there is always a way out. The Giant, whose avarice puts the entire world in jeopardy, can be converted. This is a particularly hopeful message if we understand ourselves to be human giants wreaking havoc, tampering with earth systems, in our own non-fairytale ways. It is hopeful to think the power to kill gardens, to destroy the planet itself, could be matched by the redemptive power of the next generation to reverse such destructive impulses; that we could be compelled to repair the world through gestures of kindness and generosity.

If the ‘Anthropocene’ teaches us that humans are a geological force, Wilde’s story offers the possibility that overbearing actions can be rethought and undone. It provides a

simple myth of self-transformation—the refuge of a feel-good fantasy of reform built on spiritual and emotional awakening rather than political change.

In its sentimental and educative countenance, it is a tale that conforms to the didactic conventions of the Victorian period. Underscoring Wilde's work is a belief in fairy tales as offering a vision of love and beauty that might forge a different aesthetic and moral relationship to the world, one decidedly less selfish and self-serving. "It is the duty of every father to write fairytales for his children," Wilde once remarked to a friend, attributing to the fairytale the power to awaken an aestheticism and consciousness of the world (quoted in Killeen, 10). Yet Wilde also admitted the results might be unpredictable given that "the mind of the child is a great mystery" (quoted in Killeen, 10). Given its thematic flexibility, it is not surprising that *The Selfish Giant* has continued to find new audiences. In recent years, it has been adapted as a ballet (1990s), a symphony (2010), a musical (2013) and a feature film (2013.) The stern religious creed has given way to a looser social allegory. But, revealingly, the figure of the child redeemer has remained.⁷ Clio Barnard's film adaptation seems all the more notable and resonates all the more strongly for challenging, rather than reinscribing, this established norm.

Reworking *The Selfish Giant* (2013)

In 2013, British filmmaker Clio Barnard released a secular interpretation of Wilde's children's tale set in the dangerous debris-filled landscape of Bradford, England. The walled garden of perpetual winter is now a scrap metal yard run by an exploitative scrap dealer (a giant in presence and impact) who is oddly named "Kitty." His penchant for turning every relationship into an extractive one is the embodiment of selfishness. The fallen landscape prefigured in Wilde's story has found an echo in a postindustrial world

of chronic poverty and unemployment. In lieu of castles, we see huge electrical towers and nuclear reactors rising in the fog. The buzz and hum of electrical wires adds a portentous undercurrent, telegraphing danger.

Among the many adaptations of *The Selfish Giant*, this critically acclaimed, low-budget film version stands apart for its portrayal of children. Far from being idealized, the lead boys, Swifty and Arbor, are foul-mouthed “scrappers” who have been expelled from school for truancy and delinquency.⁴⁵ They both live in council housing and scavenge on the streets of Yorkshire for discarded metal before selling it to Kitty at the scrapyards in hopes of earning some money, some of which they put towards their family debts. They seem to hail from a past era in which childhood and danger were intrinsically bound.

Which is to say, this is not the world of helicopter parenting or structured play. Arbor (Conner Chapman) is a walking tinderbox—a wiry, blond boy, with a torn bomber jacket and swagger. He has ADHD but is disinclined to take his Ritalin as though ever mistrustful of anything that comes in the guise of care or relief. Swifty (Shaun Thomas), older and sweeter, is a horse-whisperer but in no way out to please the adults or teachers around him. Arbor has a drug-addicted, debt-ridden older brother. Swifty has a large no-income family with a violent father. The film is shaped around the unaffected coarseness of these two non-professional actors who bicker and cajole and deliver their lines in mumbles, shouts and endless curses. They are an odd and oddly endearing couple to watch.

The American version was subtitled—a small marketing concession—but otherwise there are no efforts to make the story more acceptable or the main protagonists more noble-seeming amid the upset and disintegration of their lives. The ignoble boys at

⁴⁵ The backdrop to this story is the failure of liberal schooling, how a school—decorated with vapid placards that exhort the children to “BE POSITIVE”—fails the boys.

the heart of the film, in other words, are not innocent of worldly woes, and certainly not above the class-based society that so fully organizes their lives. Nor have they been rendered ineffectual through a cosseted idealization. They defy proper codes of childhood conduct and sidestep the conundrum of 'likeability' foisted on 'innocent' children. For better but mostly for worse, they have embraced the society's twisted capitalist spirit, haggling and stealing to get ahead. Like the wayward boys of Italian neorealist cinema (think of the kids in Vittorio De Sica's *Shoeshine* [1946]), Swifty and Arbor have internalized the rules of business in spite of their precarious socio-economic position. In essence, they have become as corrupt and sullied as those around them, outfitted in rigger boots and dirty clothes, trapped in a limited life of collecting and selling scrap metal (washing machines, pots and pans, but also stolen copper cable). The broken world cannot be remade or restored through their observant eyes, but perhaps we can see its pain, loss and chaos more vividly through their acts of survival and determination.

Any tenderness that exists emerges from their bond of friendship and Swifty's deep affinity for animals (horses, fawns, etc.) more abused and mistreated than the boys themselves. Swifty is the film's quiet moral center. In a town misshapen by government austerity policies and social fallout, Swifty's coarse but kind nature telegraphs his fate.

If Swifty resembles a Christ-like figure, destined to be sacrificed in payment for human selfishness, he is ultimately impotent. Platonic love notwithstanding, the boys do not have the power to be flagbearers for a more utopian world.

By dispensing with the Great Child Redeemer Story and the reductive moralism of Wilde's original text, Barnard's adaptation leaves space for more complicated stories to emerge, stories typically eclipsed by the projection of intuitive holiness on children;

stories, that is, of children who are flawed, angry, buzzing with energy, frequently rough and disagreeable. In the figure of Arbor, for example, we see what a child looks like when he is granted scrappy agency as opposed to angelic presence: one moment he cruelly proposes using a hapless foal to test a live wire, the next he valiantly defends his friend Swifty from bullies. With a harsh modern twist, Barnard conjures the complex interiority of boys confronting their own fears and exclusion in a setting where there is, as Wilde put it in the original text, “nowhere to play.” Without a garden, or any ideal childhood space of imagination, the boys are left to negotiate the depredations of a fallen, adult world.

It is not surprising that *The Selfish Giant* has been compared to Ken Loach’s classic film *Kes* (1969) and other works of British social realism.⁴⁶ Barnard, like Loach, engages with the brutal realities of working class and underclass life in contemporary Britain. The script has a true-feeling, vernacular quality with rapid, rolling dialogue salted with slang. And, yet, in *The Selfish Giant* there is a fairytale tone that adds another facet to the impassioned political subtext. The film’s sublunary setting is made to feel otherworldly by the almost constant presence of mist. The atmospheric marbling of soft and hard lends the already unusual landscape of Bradford, England a dreamlike quality. It is a setting where cows graze under crackling power lines, where chariot races take place on the local highways, and where cooling towers and starkly silhouetted trees appear as abstract shapes on the horizon. These layers of visual lyricism offer a timeless storybook

⁴⁶ Luke O Sullivan outlines some of the features of this naturalistic approach “which emphasizes genuine interplay between the actors; the use of actors who have some experience of the lives they portray; the construction of scenes around sometimes monotonous, everyday events; the deliberate focus on ugly objects and neglected landscapes; the blunt portrayal of what is disturbing; the linking of all of this to some form of social protest.” Luke O Sullivan, “Oscar Wilde: The Selfish Giant and Modern Fable”, *Quadrupheme: UK Literature Review*, February 2, 2014, <http://www.quadrupheme.com/oscar-wilde-the-selfish-giant-and-the-problem-with-contemporary-fable/>

mood to the timeless days the boys spend ‘scrapping’ and scavenging with a borrowed horse-and-cart. If there is a hard-edge to these soft, almost mystic scenes, it comes from the pervading aura of loneliness and the realization that Barnard has transported Wilde’s religious fable into a godless realm.

The film may be documentary-inflected but Barnard insists on highlighting the artifice of her narrative by introducing aesthetic interludes and unusual camera moments that denaturalize familiar objects and landmarks. The tension between naturalism and fairytale, she has said, is a way of asserting: “It’s shaped...I’m not saying it’s real” (Bunbury 2014). As Jay Kuehner (2013), writing for *Cinema Scope*, observes: “Barnard is predisposed to finding dissonance in the gaps that open when genres or forms coincide” (para. 6). Indeed, it is by playing with the gaps between documentary and fiction, between stark description and poetic imagery, between the Victorian fable and the modern interpretation, that the film skews narrative expectations. As viewers, we are left to wonder: where are we heading? What genre conventions are we following? Will the truant boys find salvation as usually happens in stories of angry young outcasts? Will they temper the cruel, giant world in keeping with the consolatory ending charted in Wilde’s original text?

The connection to Wilde’s story is loose but vital. By stripping the original tale of the consolations of religion, and by widening the meaning of selfishness in the film to encompass what Barnard has called the “selfish ideology” of capitalism, the film forces us to confront the limits of a narrative language of redemption in situations where the material and political conditions cannot support such fantasies of harmony and closure. In the impoverished town of Bradford, there is no “hyperbolic saving” or “galloping out of

the slums” (Kuehner 2013). The boys, who have been prematurely banished from any zone of ‘protected childhood,’ who have been expelled from school (which had no use for them, for which they had no use) do not find their way back to a former state of grace, if ever it existed.

It bears emphasizing that the film was made as a neo-liberal “austerity” program accelerated in Britain, a move towards complete privatization and abandonment that includes an ongoing onslaught on children and childcare. The politicians and trade unions that once claimed to represent the working class have vanished. As we see in the film, the tragedy of the market paradigm is how difficult it becomes to envision a commons-based society and how quickly it naturalizes the idea that we are all on our own. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Clio Barnard notes how important it is to break down this story of isolation and competition to see what it obscures: “I liked Glenda Jackson's speech [in the House of Commons after the death of Lady Thatcher] when she said that under Thatcher selfishness and greed had become virtues. The film is about what got lost. And what we need to value and hold on to” (Higgins 2013, para. 10). The film’s scope, in this sense, is the *longue durée*—the cruelty of a long-standing but augmented violence played out upon class lines. It seems, therefore, only appropriate that the story cannot be happily concluded until there is a resolution to the larger conflict of who gets to enjoy a life of security and simple dignity, who gets banished from the garden, and who gets to remain.

Hope Howell Hodgkins suggests that the utopian ending in Wilde’s original story, “the selfish giant’s everblooming garden,” offers a moralistic cure that in eliciting “unpurchased emotion” pre-empts us from exploring more complicated affective pathways (31). In the film extrapolation, there is no easy resolution. It is not possible to

return to some fantastical state of pre-Anthropocenic or pre-capitalist purity. In lieu of redemption, Barnard offers a ruined but necessary fable where protagonists are embedded in landscapes of mud and petrol, where the camera lingers over a vista studded with cooling towers and crackling electrical pylons as another camera might contemplate a beautiful moorland or green and pleasant meadow. In this halfway world, neither entirely good nor evil, neither paradise nor hell, biblical binaries have lost their meaning.

In choosing the brutal end over salvation, Barnard refuses to let the viewer off the hook. There is no paradise awaiting the children (not even the martyred Swifty who dies horrifically when his mortal flesh comes in contact with a high voltage cable). The bones of the literary original are here but Barnard has en fleshed the story differently. The Christ-child who appears in the Giant's garden, with stigmata on his hands and feet, may be likened to the sacrificial Swifty, whose death prompts the scrap dealer "Kitty" to remorsefully surrender to the police. But, unlike the original story, Swifty's sacrifice (as I have mentioned) does not transfigure the world. It may be that he is too culpable and unholy; his death the inevitable result of the boys' own selfish and dangerous quest for more lucrative rewards, bigger power cables, better spoils.

There is no paradise awaiting the viewer, who, in sharing the same mortal flesh as Swifty, cannot expect to rise with his soaring Christian soul. If it is true, as Grumet has observed, that "the child redeemer's innocence and moral superiority rest upon his presumed disassociation from the world," then it may be that these boys are simply too profanely associated and enmeshed, simply too worldly to lead us to a sacred above or beyond (Grumet 157). This is exactly the point Barnard wants to make: a contemporary fable cannot end on a note of incorporeal transcendence if it is to have any bearing on our

corporeal lives. We are left, thus, with the question of how a very human and already-corrupted Arbor will respond to his best friend's death and society's attempts to crush and devour him too. How will he act upon the painful lessons about greed he has learned? The answer remains unclear.

If the film sounds impossibly bleak, that isn't far off the mark. Critical response to *The Selfish Giant* has almost uniformly echoed Kuehner's verdict that the film is "unrepentantly cruel but artistically sound for sparing us the possibility of cheap salvation" (para. 7). Nonetheless, there are moments of respite and grace to be found in the fierce loyalty Arbor and Swifty show for one another. We witness this most powerfully at the end of the film when Arbor takes care of a horse that Swifty loved. It is a fleeting scene founded on the solidarity of friendship and interspecies love in a selfish world, a world marked by terrible disassociation and the waning of the communal. It is not a scene that will "better" us or "mend" society, but it is nonetheless memorable and moving, partly because it brings the contraries of childhood vulnerability and experience into creative engagement. In this scene of quiet care, we gather a glimpse of how Arbor might begin to mourn, heal and find beauty in a broken world. This is not a cynical film. We are left with an understanding that Arbor's odyssey of boyhood will continue.

Ultimately it is a film that lingers because it avoids the simplistic conclusion that the voids left by industrial, economic and ecological trauma can be refilled. If we recognize "the irrevocable violence done to the child's innocence with the irreversibility of environmental damage" (Johns-Putra 2017, 21) there can be no reconciliation or redemption so long as the crime is still in progress. As the film draws to a close, the endless wasteland of Bradford remains scarred—a haunting and fog-saturated vision of

late capitalism in the ‘Anthropocene.’ While it would be nice to think that the ideology of selfishness (and rapacious greed) could be toppled and laid to perfect rest, the fact that this Giant remains unvanquished (and arguably latent in many of us) means that there is still work to be done.

The work of transformation, of forging beauty and solidarity, is *our work*—or so the film suggests. While Barnard refrains from offering instruction on how we should live in, and mend, our broken world, the film leaves space for ongoing discussion. For instance: How will we fill the hole left by the absence of a child redeemer? How might we envision a post-saviour society? What is left when our myths of rescue and redemption fall away? What if there is no easy way out?

Beyond the Messianic Dream

Given my particular passions and interests, I find myself wondering if there is a consonance between messianic dreams of an easy climate solution and the transcendental fantasies that lurk beneath stories of the child redeemer. I wonder how our environmental stories perpetuate and/or challenge the framework of the child redeemer. I wonder at the many forms care can take and, in particular, I wonder about the discourses of care that have swaddled the child: protective love and idealization being the most obvious and potentially insidious. Are there forms of care that might better honor child subjectivity and agency? How might an ecological ethic embrace a view of childhood as “complex and capacious” (Gubar 212) and what would that do to collective social dreams of a “better future”? What are the implications of silencing ecological despair or loss through stories of redemption (a trope exemplified by Wilde’s *The Selfish Giant*)? How might

stories (such as Barnard's *The Selfish Giant*) help us think about the possibilities of childhood agency and resistance beyond a sentimental logic of redemption or a nihilistic logic posing as social realism?

Clio Barnard's multi-layered fable shows that there is always a mutinous and capricious child such as Arbor to push back against representations of 'the child.' As Madeleine Grumet writes: "Those of us who share our lives with children know that neither the image of the corrupt child born in original sin nor the image of the innocent babe describes the wily, winsome, wise, wild, and whiny creatures who are our kids. Nevertheless, our relations with these very real, very complex and contradictory creatures are influenced by the semiotic history of childhood" (156-157).

Through the original story of *The Selfish Giant* and Barnard's narrative reworking we find critical insights into how we might rethink the figure of the child in an unstable world of nature, and how literature and film might be uniquely positioned to facilitate such an experience. At the same time, it bears noting that while both the book and the film were created as fables of childhood *for children*, the extent to which children have been exposed to the latter remains unclear. (It was classified by the British Board of Film Classification as suitable only for 15 years and older and similarly rated in Canada for viewers 14 years and up.) Barnard has nonetheless maintained that she sees this as a film for *all* ages. In an interview with *The Observer*, she states: "I do think we protect children way too much and at our own peril and maybe we are protecting ourselves.") In another interview with *The Moveable Fest*, she insists this is a story she would tell her own young children (Saito 2013).

Barnard proposes that realist modes of storytelling offer a necessary rejoinder to the fantasy bias in popular children's culture. Her perspective contests a view of children's cinema as a sheltered or cosseted space that can be sequestered from the worries and fears of adulthood. Such protections, she suggests, are disingenuous because they do not acknowledge the genuine difficulties many children and young adults experience in their daily lives and will continue to face in the future.

As for the future bequeathed to us by *The Selfish Giant*, its horizon remains misty and unknown. Uncertainty lingers. What are we to do (collectively) if the garden cannot be reconstituted, if children (alone) are not able to "make the world a better place" (Grumet 157)? What new stories and figures can help us imagine a different future?

In the remainder of this chapter, I will continue to explore counter-figures and narrative modes that unsettle the familiar fantasy of redemption and invite us to think past sentimental or nostalgic arguments for ecological preservation (premised on saving the world "as it is"). Certain questions recur: who might replace the child redeemer—what new avatars can help us navigate a crumbling and unequal world, "a human cosmos that may be dirtied beyond repair" (Yaeger 2013)? We are in the midst of a ferocious altering of the earth's biosphere. At the same time, we are witnessing the shredding of environmental protections and the approval of dirty oil pipelines across the North American continent. What new stories and models of kinship are emerging to address the political, epistemological, existential, narrative challenges of this precipitous moment?

Beyond Fixes and Fixed Figures

The view of the “nature child,” as instinctual guardian or redeemer of the earth, is not the only romantic trope of environmental politics. The activist imagination has relied on other fixed figures and favoured metonymies (of innocence, purity, simplicity, futurity). Pooja Rangan writes cogently on how “beleaguered social subjects” (“the subaltern, the indigenous native, the child, the animal, the refugee”) has been fetishized by and within humanitarian discourse and social movements. Activists have fixed on countercultural role models in the face of chaotic realities, just as the North American mainstream has turned to its own heroes (CEO saviours, techo-fixers, geo-engineers) to lead the way. These figures have been used to ignite, rally, generate frisson, hope. As Rangan argues, “discourses of liberal/humanitarian media are not necessarily exempt from the exploitative neoliberal project of garnering ‘affective’ or ‘immaterial’ labor” from the romanticized other (2011, 147).

A significant version of this ‘garnering of affective labor’ can be seen in non-Indigenous encounters with Indigenous cultures of resistance. Addressing the figure of the “indigenous environmentalist,” for example, Clare Bradford observes “a common trope through which Indigenous cultures are depicted” is “as a boon to non-Indigenous characters” (94). Indigeneity, cast as a rampart against the ills of industrialized society, becomes a vehicle for non-Indigenous healing and salvation.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ For debates and discussions on the “totemic power” of the “ecological Indian,” see: Francis, D. (1992). *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press; Krech, S. (2000). *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History*. NY: WW Norton & Company; King, T. (2013); King, T. (2016). *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America*. Toronto: Anchor Canada; Monani, S. (2014). Evoking Sympathy and Empathy: The Ecological Indian and Indigenous Eco-Activism in *Moving Environments: Affect, Emotion, Ecology and Film*. ed. Alexa Wiek von Mossner. Environmental Humanities Series. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 225-247. Poet Tommy Pico’s *Nature Poem* takes on colonial-white stereotypes of American Indian-ness and Pico’s resultant reluctance to write about nature (Tin House, 2017).

To point out that the “ecological Indian” figure remains a “controversial symbol of environmental consciousness” (Monani 2014, 225) is not to dismiss the possibility of interrupting or intervening in its colonial meanings. Within Indigenous activist communities, resignified versions (e.g. ‘nature guardians,’ ‘water protectors,’ etc.) have provided a means of refuting histories of colonial oppression and empowering messages of Indigenous agency against capitalism’s narratives of progress and settlement.⁴⁸ As Darren Ranco writes: “In the politics of recognition, such images and knowledge play a role in issues of ecological legitimacy...” (45).⁴⁹

Corinn Columpar and Jace Weaver, in line with other Indigenous scholars and historians, maintain that there needs to be a way of refuting essentializing narratives while recognizing that there is something historical and “real” grounding the idea of the “ecological Indian.” It is not merely a fabricated presence. Indigenous communities have maintained models and memories of other ways of being in the world that challenge orthodoxies of capitalist land ownership and extraction for profit. There needs, in essence, to be a way of understanding and protecting the alterity of Indigenous

⁴⁸ Recent Indigenous pipeline battles are instructive here. Addressing the Dakota Access Pipeline protests at Standing Rock in late 2016, activist Kelly Hayes pointed to the limits of an assimilative NGO framework that displaces the decolonization struggle at the heart of the movement. As she writes in a widely circulated article for *Yes! Magazine*: “When ‘climate justice’, in a very broad sense, becomes the center of conversation, our fronts of struggle are often reduced to a staging ground for the messaging of NGOs. This is happening far too frequently in public discussion of #NoDAPL. Yes, everyone should be talking about climate change, but you should also be talking about the fact that Native communities deserve to survive, because our lives are worth defending in their own right — not simply because ‘this affects us all.’” A universal frame, in other words, takes the focus away from the non-universal struggle at the centre of the “NoDAPL” protests.

<http://www.yesmagazine.org/how-to-talk-about-standing-rock-20161028>

⁴⁹ While remaining sympathetic to the tactical use of ‘nature guardian’ tropes, Ranco worries that there may be a heavy cost. “The fact that Indians have to use a stereotype rooted in colonial desires for this type of recognition is tragic, not only because these stereotypes are ‘misleading’ but because they potentially fulfill the colonial fantasies of disappearance. In this logic, if you stop acting like ‘real Indians,’ your political authority (and your land) might just disappear, even though the settler state has tried to assimilate you” (45).

perspectives and traditional worldviews as pluralistic, as earned rather than intrinsic, as resulting from “the honest and extremely difficult struggles of Indigenous peoples to meet ecological challenges confronting them” (Weaver 1996, xvi). Indigenous knowledge should be recognized as “an evolving epistemology rather than an essentialized harmony” (Monani 2016, 56).

I want to suggest that the anti-essentialist work of certain childhood scholars expresses a similar interest in preserving the irreducible plurality *and* alterity of ‘the child’. Marah Gubar’s work on “artful dodgers,” for example, shows how “young people enmeshed in ideology might nonetheless deviate from rather than ventriloquize various social, cultural, and literary protocols” (2009, 7). This ‘dodging’ of fixed terms and schematics is a reminder that the living, mercurial subject will always elude the narrow narrative frames imposed on her/him. Our favoured metonymies and fixed figures stand on shaky ground.⁵⁰ Children are not merely acquiescent subjects who assume their role in a script adults write for them. As Clio Barnard reminds us in her adaptation of *The Selfish Giant*, our stories of contemporary childhood beg for specificity and attention to singularities: “We idealize these children, we demonize these children! They’re children, too, we need to remember that” (quoted in Sarhimaa 2014).

Barnard’s lead boys, Swifty and Arbor, have the dodger in them but they also recall Kathryn Bond Stockton’s conception of the queer child who grows “sideways”—straying from assumptions of what is developmentally appropriate, refusing to become replicas of their adult role models (2009). The ‘sideways child,’ in Stockton’s story, is

⁵⁰ Beryle Langer’s work on children and consumer capitalism shows how the romantic construction of childhood shifted in the last quarter of the 20th century under late capitalism when childhood was reconstituted as a time of consumption: “In invoking the myth of the ‘sacred child’, however, capital also elicits ambivalence about the ‘profanity’ of commercial intrusion into the domain of childhood” (67).

non-teleological; does not enable a seamless reproduction of the self or a perpetuation of the existing social order. The ‘sideways child’ is neither a sentimental memory of the past, nor a redemptive cipher of a future-to-come.

Stockton’s thinking offers an important rejoinder to Lee Edelman’s influential writing on reproductive futurity. She takes a different path to critique the child figure, one that explores the “elegant, unruly contours of growing that don’t speak continuance,” that develops “to the side of cultural ideals” (2009, 13).⁵¹ She rejects Edelman’s anti-social “No Future” narrative and rejects his nihilistic embrace of oblivion and apocalyptic ends. To repudiate politics and the future in favour of an anti-relational *jouissance* of the present, she suggests, is to ignore the absence of future felt and borne by so many.⁵²

The strength of Gubar and Stockton’s work is their interest in knowing the child beyond heroic reifications and beyond an idea of reproductive continuance. Stockton’s view of the future does not see it as that single direction ahead, towards a redemptive horizon. In her move to challenge the cultural momentum of a linear developmental model, she invites us to consider alternative routes of becoming and acting in the world.

Hope Beyond Redemption

Hannah Arendt offers another way of thinking about children’s future potentiality. It is a conception of ‘natality’ that emerges from her critique of progressive development in her

⁵¹ Commenting on her work seven years later, Stockton says, “I opened the *queerness* of children into complication, unseen possibility, radical darkness (not normativity), and queer innocence of all things” (2016, 531).

⁵² Mari Ruti proposes that Edelman’s radical negativity “can only be undertaken from a position of relative security, that deprived subjects—some women, racially and ethnically marked individuals, and those who lead economically precarious lives...simply cannot afford to abandon themselves to the *jouissance* of the death drive in the way that more secure subjects might be tempted (or even compelled) to do” (2008, 116). Or, as Jinthana Haritaworn states elsewhere: “the ability to embrace death presumes an ascendant subject already anchored in the realm of life” (2015, 212).

writing on education and the political realm. For Arendt, in *The Human Condition*, the “miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, ‘natural’ ruin is ultimately the fact of natality” (247).

Arendt thinking on natality as “the new beginning inherent in birth,” grounded in the “capacity of beginning something anew” (9) offers a valuable account of ‘the child’ as a liberatory force. This is not a vision of the child redeemer trotted out during sentimental school assemblies and graduation ceremonies where the child is called upon to make the world a better place. It is not a politics of the child structured on reproducing the future as a version of the same. Nor is it a fantasy of enlightened futurity and redemption that lets adults “off the hook” on a torched and trashed planet. Arendt’s understanding of political renewal through the actions of new humans places tremendous importance on the power *and* fragility of children. As adults, we cannot renounce our own agency in favour of the child’s actions. The coming of the new and young, beckons responsibility in the present—not passive waiting for eschatological salvation or deliverance.

Indeed, in Arendt’s theorizing, the adult (educator) is tasked with manifold responsibilities, including the responsibility: *to introduce* newcomers to the world as it is and has been, *to protect* the child’s development against worldly pressures, *to prepare* the child to preserve *and* change the world in the future. The nascent possibilities born with every child must be carefully guarded until they can come to fruition. As Arendt writes:

Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, not to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something

unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world (1998, 14).

What feels especially profound about “natality” in Arendt’s thinking is the suggestion that it does not abide in spaces of private kinship or biological reproduction but, rather, in the public realm; the place of “second birth” where we are born again through our words and deeds, born again by taking responsibility for our own creative actions. Indeed, Arendt’s conception of political action as generative of new beginnings leads us away from narrow kinship structures, oriented towards tradition and the unthinking transmission of common values into the future, toward the creation of a broader and more pluralist public.

Far from romanticizing the role of the child as an agent of compliant and reproductive continuance, Arendtian “natality” situates the child as a potential *un-settler*, a disruptive or ruptural newcomer who may “destroy the world as the present generation knows it and ‘set right’ traditions that wear out their usefulness in the course of human history” (Kennedy 387), thus acting in the supple and imaginative spirit of invigoration.

Put another way: because the Arendtian newcomer or beginner does not conform to an adult fantasy of the future’s unfolding, Arendt’s account of natality disrupts the normative order of a reproductive future, inviting a radical reassessment of our social structures and their extractive logic (i.e. the logic that contributed to our climate crisis). Because the child’s intervention in the trajectory of political life cannot be known or secured in advance, the story of the compliant child redeemer is destroyed. We shift from the metaphysical to the political realm, from the salvific individual to a plurality of people engaged in communal support, from the prewritten story of redemption to the unwritten story of renewal and social change.

In the film version of *The Selfish Giant*, the story of social struggle is ongoing. Clio Barnard leaves us with a tragic picture of humanity and coming of age where a despoiled and ruthlessly impoverished town creates estranged communities and alienated individuals. It is only in the final moments that a thread of hope emerges in the eye of a forgiving mother and the quietly tender communion of a boy (Arbor) and a horse. There are no easy cathartic tears but it is in these last moments that we witness the Arendtian seed of something beyond inheritance and beyond the atomisation of the present. It is here that we see the possibility that estrangement from the world (and its legacies of violence, impoverishment and ecological destruction) may become love for the world-to-be; that by entering into a web of relations, bound in struggle with others, a boy (severed from the communal sphere) might become part of a common world.

Where Wilde's original story summoned a Christian fantasy of salvation where hope is restored to the winter-bound garden, Barnard's film has no sacred ending. There is no nostalgic return to a prelapsarian space. There is no narrative compensation for ruinous social and ecological conditions or for a public sphere ravaged by deregulated capitalism. Without remaking the social order the characters are destined to remain tied to worlds that cannot sustain them or allow them to flourish. To some viewers this might seem unduly pessimistic. It might seem ungenerous to show childhood under such unrelentingly harsh circumstances but I would argue there is generosity in painting children as more than symbols of innocent futurity.

Once we relinquish the comforting fantasy of the child redeemer we are free to imagine and enact other possible stories and other more communal futures. We are beckoned to chart new pathways. But that means unraveling so much of what we

practice. It means reenvisioning our habits of identification to encompass characters and creatures that may not be “likeable” or may be actively vilified, stories that may be “unrelatable,” narratives that may be difficult and daringly internalized, unsympathetic species, uneasy companions without humanist polish. It means encountering what Janet Fiskio calls “the unbearable grief of climate change” without rushing “to break out of this ‘unbearability’ by turning to technological optimism or environmental education” (2017, 100). Ultimately, it means imagining another way of being, another way of going on—that moves beyond selfishness and neglect towards an endless labour of love and solidarity.

CHAPTER TWO

Protected or Prepared? Children in a Stormy World

*“My mother groan'd! my father wept.
Into the dangerous world I leapt.” —William Blake (1794)*

*“No one after a certain age has the right to this kind of innocence,
to this degree of ignorance or amnesia.” —Susan Sontag (2004)*

*“I would like to make a film to tell children it's good to be alive.”
—Hayao Miyazaki*

IN 2009, the British government's Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) provoked public controversy when it launched a television and cinema advert to promote a CO₂ carbon reduction initiative. The £6m "Bedtime Stories" ad (viewable on YouTube), features a father telling his young daughter a bedtime story about “a land where the weather was very, very strange.” As he proceeds to describe this place with “awful heat waves in some parts, and in others, terrible storms and floods,” an animation of the book appears on screen. A bunny weeps on drought-stricken land, a puppy drowns in a flooded middle class neighborhood, and a black fang-tooth “CO₂” monster towers in the sky. The daughter grows visibly upset at which point the father tells her that if “grown-ups” turned off things such as light bulbs “maybe they could save the land for the little children.” The girl's wide-eyed reaction, “Is there a happy ending?” is answered by a female voiceover saying, “It's up to us how the story ends. See what you can do.”

The ad, which premiered during an episode of *Coronation Street* (October 9, 2009), provoked a torrent of criticism. Nearly a thousand viewers sent letters of concern to the Advertising Standards Agency. While some took issue with the science, arguing that there was no evidence to support claims of anthropogenic climate change, a number

of the complaints focused on the ad's scary and upsetting tone and expressed the worry that climate change might frighten children.⁵³ A debate ensued in newspaper comment sections and on online forums: Was the advert's approach an example of scaremongering or was it a necessary wake-up call? Did DECC go too far in airing the advert during prime time (i.e. 'family time')?⁵⁴

Defending the ad's rhetorical and creative approach, the then British Climate Change minister Joan Ruddock stated: "The ad is directed at adults, but we know that the proposition to 'protect the next generation' is a motivating one."⁵⁵ Upon investigation, the Advertising Standards Association determined that the TV ad did not breach its guidelines.⁵⁶

I have now seen the ad many times and my ambivalence about its aesthetic approach and rhetorical address—which relies on a rationalist approach to 'behavioral change' as a strategy for mitigating climate change—remains unresolved. On the one hand, the goal of encouraging British adults to think about the impact their climate emissions will have on their children's futures seems laudable enough. But the ad raises for me lingering concerns relating to climate change communication and specifically the

⁵³ On September 23, 2009, DECC issued a statement attesting to the "incontrovertible nature of the science that underpins the campaign material, which is founded on basic physics, a vast body of peer-reviewed scientific literature, and an overwhelming consensus of climate science experts." (See: "DECC/ AMV response to ASA Complaints Re – ACT ON").

⁵⁴ As Alice Bell notes in her excellent commentary on the "Bedtime Stories" controversy, the spectre of frightened children can support a host of different arguments: "For example, a recent Unicef report on a poll of UK children, stressed youthful concern about climate change and was tied to pressure on the government to increase coverage of the issue in schools (Carrington, 2013). On the other hand, there is Bjørn Lomborg (2009) chastising campaigners for 'frightening children with exaggerations', and claims that young people need to learn abstracted scientific principles not 'issues' (Shepherd, 2011)" [Bell 2014, 39-40].

⁵⁵ (2013, February 15). Scary' UK climate ad faces probe. *BBC*. Retrieved from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8317998.stm>

⁵⁶ According to the BBC News, "A total of 939 people complained to the ASA about the "Act on CO2" campaign." <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8571353.stm>

role of guilt and fear as public pedagogy strategies. While there may be value in speaking more dramatically about climate change to combat apathy, there are obvious limitations to what can be imparted in a one minute eco-commercial and enduring questions about whether ‘scaring’ individuals ‘green’ and/or making adults feel vulnerable via their offspring are productive ways to rouse collective action against climate change.⁵⁷

My guess is that even the most green-hearted viewer would find the decision to depict crying farm animals and drowning family pets a puzzling if not mawkish one. A viewer who understands the seriousness of this global emergency would likely find something strange if not misleading in the ad’s proposed solutions. It is hard to fathom, for example, that the relatively undramatic act of switching off lights when we leave rooms could really, on its own, prevent a future world blighted by heat waves and floods.⁵⁸

I do not wish to diminish the importance of small actions or efforts to move beyond ‘business as usual’ habits of carbon consumption, particularly bearing in mind that ecological damage is accretive and constituted through countless quotidian and mundane actions—actions that, in their banality and dilution of agency, often fail to register as ‘destructive’.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, in the advert, the heaviness of the problem is met

⁵⁷ See: <http://ecohearth.com/eco-blogs/eco-international/1250-scared-green-uk-climate-change-commercial-is-said-to-frighten-children.html>

⁵⁸ Of course, as one reader of this chapter aptly noted, “turning on the lights does constitute an act of destruction and it can be extremely helpful to allow young people to attend to this.” But the point I wish to make here is one of larger context and the danger of staying within a neoliberal green consumerist logic focused on individual as opposed to collective actions.

⁵⁹ For more on the dilution of agency, see: Greg Garrard’s article “The unbearable lightness of green: air travel, climate change and literature.” He addresses a central paradox of ecological responsibility: “human population simultaneously magnifies the *cumulative* impact of our actions and *dilutes* my individual agency. The heavier we get, the lighter I become. As Timothy Clark has perceptively observed, nothing I do is insignificant: switching lights off, eating air-freighted green beans... At the same time, everything I do is insignificant, either because of the scale and unpredictability of the global climate system or because of—for shorthand—China” (2013, 185).

with such a lightness of response as to feel almost surreal. For instance, at no point does the commercial show the dramatic shifts to consumption, lifestyle and identity that might promote transformative, justice-oriented goals. Forget community building or acts of resource and wealth distribution that might diffuse impacts that threaten to affect the world horribly unevenly. The nightmare vision of climate change in “Bedtime Stories,” I would suggest, is paradoxically supported by its view of First World consumers locked in the silos of their own individual, nuclear, lifestyle choices. It is a recurring nightmare in which the environmentalist mainstream continues to promote neoliberal consumer behavior—further supporting a model of capitalism and unchecked growth that continues to fail the planet on a colossal and grievous scale.

But critiques aside, I do find the advert a worthy object of discussion inasmuch as it demonstrates boundaries that become apparent whenever children are introduced to stories involving challenging or difficult subjects. What intrigues me most about the “Bedtime Stories” controversy is the swirl of conversation it generated around the theme of ‘appropriateness.’ When critics charged that the DECC was “scaring defenceless kids with nightmarish bedtime stories,” the setting (the sanctuary of a bedroom) and the form (the sacrosanct bedtime story) seemed to be part of this concern.⁶⁰ In these terms, the decision to use a bedtime tale to speak of a dystopian future to those least prepared to deal with it, was perceived to be not only a violation of a dream of family togetherness, but an act of heresy. (Or course, all of this was framed within the terms of a white, middle class family with its own situated relationship to safety and knowledge, danger and harm.)

⁶⁰ See: <http://ecohearth.com/eco-blogs/eco-international/1250-scared-green-uk-climate-change-commercial-is-said-to-frighten-children.html>

When others defended the ad’s approach and style of delivery by arguing that the impacts of climate change are “the opposite of nice” and thus warrant non-nice methods of representation, the ad was framed within the terms of an important and precautionary lesson.⁶¹ Within this logic, it was defensible and even ethical to frighten children; it could even be taken as an act of love, if it prompted the concerted emissions reductions that would reduce the likelihood of future harm.

I am interested in these debates and how they clarify boundary disputes. Embedded in the “Bedtime Stories” disagreement is an ongoing debate about childhood, culture, knowledge, trauma, agency and truth-telling that plays out again and again in cultural and educational debates involving the presentation of difficult and dissonant themes in children’s literature and film. In this sense, the controversy was not unprecedented. And as with controversies prior and since, both sides were drawing on two wells of thought tied to the same groundwater. Both sides proffered that children’s encounters with the monstrous world needed to be deftly *managed*. Whether this would happen through a pedagogy of reassurance or a “pedagogy of consternation” (Mario Di Paolantonio 2011) was, and remains, the crux of the conflict and the subject of this chapter.

This chapter takes a close look at the issue of introducing children to difficult climate knowledge, and pays particular attention to notions of childhood innocence and maturation that tend to get framed within a utopian/dystopian binary of “protecting/preparing” children for the messy and monstrous world. I take the question of ‘what shall we tell the children?’ as a spur for exploring the limits of this binary and turn

⁶¹ See: <http://ecohearth.com/eco-blogs/eco-international/1250-scared-green-uk-climate-change-commercial-is-said-to-frighten-children.html>

to the work of Japanese animator Hayao Miyazaki in the second half of this chapter to illuminate other possible passageways. I don't profess to offer easy answers, but rather reflect upon some of the assumptions embedded in contemporary conversations about suitable knowledge while exploring the role fantasy might play in permitting access to truths that are harder to take in realist modes.

The issue of how one might lead the young into the complexities of the contemporary moment without inducing trauma is of paramount importance. At the same time, our definition of ecological trauma cannot be limited to the affective bombardment of the human subject. My attempt to create a frame capable of balancing these two conflictive understandings results in a palpable tension within these pages. Thus, while the first half of this chapter, focuses on 'humanist' considerations related to how we ('human educators and writers') might come to grips with the changing character of planetary life. The second half attempts to widen the perspective by working towards a model of ecological subjectivity that questions human sovereignty, and that rejects the agential/passive divide between humans/nature which led us to this point in history.

In the non-anthropocentric world of Hayao Miyazaki, we see a planetary ecology transformed beyond human control or willing. The Western cultural emphasis on an autonomous human hero (who effects change through an awakening of consciousness) has receded. Instead of a world built on separation and sovereign subjects, Miyazaki offers a view of collective life charged with the power and animacy of non-human forces, attuned to damaged histories and future-making potentialities.

Protected or Prepared?

In a world of strife and sorrow, how much should children be told? What can they bear, and when does knowledge violate their emotional integrity? At what cost and to what end do we choose to spare or expose children to traumatic subjects? And, perhaps more importantly, given our media-saturated world, what do they already know?

Some psychologists and educators have reported an escalation in the anxiety levels of young people, who are exposed to doomsday talk about the future of our planet (Doherty and Clayton, 2011.) Other writers have voiced concerns about the timing and manner in which children are introduced to unsettling ecological narratives.⁶² How is the knowledge being conveyed and to what end? Clare Bradford expresses her worry that: “to explain to young children that pygmy hippos are under serious threat or that elephants are still being killed for their tusks or that wilderness areas are disappearing is to construct a dangerous and unstable world in which environmentalist values have largely failed to halt ecological problems” (2003, 112).

What does knowledge, expressed here as a kind of seeping terror, achieve? Is there a way of framing ecology as a “children’s issue” in a way that doesn’t devolve responsibility to younger generations (Buckingham 2000, 45) but that still addresses the impact of consumer-driven childhoods on the biosphere? Is it possible to give weight to the issues without leaving children in a state of immobilizing horror or depression about the state of the world? Can there be such thing as a ‘kid-friendly’ praxis of ecological catastrophe?

⁶² See: Alice Bell (2014), Sandra Steingraber (2008) and Clare Bradford (2003).

These are the sorts of questions that inevitably haunt the work of educators, activists and writers whose work with children is directed towards introducing a more thoughtful and heterogeneous environmentalism that does not repress the demands—nor the social/ontological conflicts and ethical obligations—of this ongoing ‘crisis’ moment.

For ecologist-activist Sandra Steingraber, the challenge is to avoid telling “pediatric versions of the climate change story”—consoling but simplified fictions of heroic individuals fighting to save the planet and the world’s people banding together to solve “a big problem” (2008). For scholar-activist Kamala Platt, the task is to find ways “to address social issues and to promote a path toward productive resolutions without shattering a sense of hope, without destroying . . . the ‘green’ and replacing it with ‘gray’.” (192)

At its extreme, the question of whether and how climate-insulated children should be taught about environmental threats illuminates disparate views of “protected” childhood versus “prepared” childhood (Mintz 2004, viii). Participants in these ongoing debates have historically represented two opposing positions: one that seeks to shelter children from depictions of the harsh and stormy world so as to preserve “their sense of innocent wonder” (Mintz vii), and another that wishes to immerse them in such depictions so as to equip them for adult roles and realities.⁶³

Naturally, this is a caricatured rendition and most people are far more conflicted when it comes to ‘protecting’ or ‘preparing’ actual children, and tend to fall somewhere

⁶³ The idea that knowledge is an existential necessity in preparing children for the difficult future circulated again in March 2016 when the West Virginia House of Delegates voted to block Next Generation Science Standards that would teach students about human-induced climate change. In response, Ann Reid, executive director of the National Centre for Science Education, responded: “West Virginia’s children, like children everywhere, need to learn about the science of climate change since it is they who will have to live in a world that we have been warming.” See: <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2016/02/29/3754731/west-virginia-house-halts-science-standards-over-climate/>

between these positions. This is certainly true of Sandra Steingraber who, in a much-circulated essay for *Orion Magazine*, wrestled with why she delayed having “the big talk” with her children about climate change despite her commitment to speaking boldly about the issue in public (2008). Even prominent US climate scientist James Hansen remains conflicted. As Alice Bell notes, Hansen “has written a book for adults entitled *Storms of My Grandchildren* and is clearly happy to refer to children in order to talk to adults. However he too suggests that you can’t tell children about climate change because it is too scary. Rather, Hansen suggests working to help re-connect young people with nature so they are better prepared to deal with the issue (Hansen 2013)” (Bell 2014, 40).⁶⁴

The crux of the issue is the developmental appropriateness of traumatic knowledge. In current scholarship on children’s literature of the Holocaust, Kenneth Kidd has noted a recent shift away from “the idea that young readers should be protected from evil and toward the conviction that they should be exposed to it.” As he writes: “On the one hand, we continue to believe that children should be protected from trauma, but increasingly we also seem to expect that trauma must be experienced in order to be understood, so that books about trauma can only be effective if they frighten or even endanger the child” (Kidd 2011, 191). Kidd argues that this “dialectic of protection and exposure (and also knowledge and denial)” remains unresolved in many Holocaust stories for young people. As a result, there is a strong tendency to represent trauma through an ambivalent lens, turning away from rather than confronting “the difficulties of

⁶⁴ David Sobel shares this view. In *Ecophobia*, he argues that as parents and educators we need to foster opportunities for children to connect with nature and care for the earth before we ask them to save it. As he has asked: “What really happens when we lay the weight of the world’s environmental problems on eight and nine year-olds already haunted with too many concerns and not enough real contact with nature?” See: <http://www.yesmagazine.org/issues/education-for-life/803>

its subject matter” (Kidd 192, 185).

In *Melancholia and Maturation: The Use of Trauma in American Children’s Literature*, Eric Tribunella goes further to suggest that we count on literature to enact a loss of innocence, that it provides an almost ritualistic means of inciting an experience of trauma for children who have been sheltered from difficulty. Tribunella notes that a common narrative in twentieth century literature for youth is that of the loss of a loved object, place or ideal—followed by the youth’s subsequent maturation in learning to overcome that loss. He asks about the pedagogical emphasis on the traumatic as a way of provoking the development of children: “Why do we feel that such an experience is useful in ushering children into adulthood?” (xi) His observations raise important questions for any ‘stormy world’ pedagogy. For instance, how might climate culture and education be tied to this process of “melancholic maturation” or hard knocks learning? Is there a space beyond eliciting anguish and offering gentle solace?⁶⁵

Tribunella’s idea of “melancholic maturation” allows us to ask how grief grounds knowledge and how the contrived or actual experience of loss has come to signal the transition from unknowing childhood to knowing adulthood.⁶⁶ At the same time, I would suggest that there are limits to this idea and the binary of innocence and experience it supports. Notions of children’s moral awakening, while well intentioned, can have a

⁶⁵ The contours of childhood are constantly being redrawn alongside notions of terrible and comforting literature. These are not stable terms. It is worth considering, for example, shifting attitudes to the fantastically ‘dark’ tales of the Brothers Grimm, which have been variously abridged, sanitized and Disneyfied in the name of protecting contemporary children.

⁶⁶ While the triggering event may change, “coming of age” in (and through) children’s fiction has commonly meant achieving maturity through an experience of mournfulness. Through lessons about the arduousness of life children are seen to make the necessary transition to moral awareness. This cruel-ameliorative “hard knocks” approach plays out in the domestic sphere as well. Thus, for example, to compel a five-year-old to finish his/her dinner because there are “people starving in the world” is to instruct that child on becoming a grave and contrite global citizen; or to tell a nine-year-old child who has been keening over a minor disappointment about Anne Frank or Hitler is to scold that child into a sense of his/her proper emotional and ontological proportions.

condescending quality, ascribing a facile naiveté and a pre-politicized past to children. Children are ennobled yet robbed of social and emotional complexity. Thus, for example, we may look to children to be our spiritual guides, (showing us how to triumph over pain through simple affirmations of love, resilience and hope.) But all of this assumes a prior purity and innocence, distributed unevenly to differently emplaced and raced bodies.

Today, the proliferation of new technologies and the sheer ubiquity of media messages renders it almost impossible (if it ever was possible) for adults to completely protect or safeguard the young from previously forbidden topics (Buckingham 2000). The idea that there is a moment in adolescence when children experience a traumatic revelation or “negative epiphany” in the sense described by Susan Sontag in her classic *On Photography* (1977) seems strangely outmoded, and even romantic in the face of digital childhood.⁶⁷

As Susan Sontag herself observed nearly forty years ago, “Today that sort of material impinges on people very early—through television, say—so that it would not be possible for anyone growing up later than the 1940's to be a *horror virgin* and to see atrocious, appalling images for the first time at the age of 12. That was before television, and when newspapers would print only very discreet photographs” (Sontag, NYT, 1977, *my emphasis*).

⁶⁷ In 1945, Sontag came across photographs of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau while browsing in a bookstore in Santa Monica. “For me,” she wrote in 1977, “it seems plausible to me to divide my life into two parts, before I saw those photographs (I was twelve) and after...” Coming from an exceptionally sheltered childhood in which she had never seen “any violence at all,” Sontag was left in a state of “tremendous shock” and unease. “What good was served by seeing them?” Sontag writes. “They were only photographs—of an event I had scarcely heard of and could do nothing to affect... When I looked at those photographs something broke” (Sontag, 1977).

The traditional binary of innocence and experience, to put it simply, fails to account for our image-saturated and ever-more unjust world where what is permissible and suitable by way of knowledge is simply ungovernable. More significantly, it ignores and obscures the range of traumatic experience/knowledge that youth already experience, rather than just read about.

Native American author Sherman Alexie, for example, has argued that the idea of the innocent child ‘wounded by traumatic literature’ does not as readily apply to children who are born into situations of precarity and gross inequality.

Responding to a 2011 *Wall Street Journal* article which questioned the virtue of “darkly themed children’s literature” and which proposed that children needed to be protected from the bulldozing of “coarseness and misery” into their lives (see: Meghan Cox Gurdon, "Darkness Too Visible"), Alexie writes:

When some cultural critics fret about the “ever-more-appalling” YA books, they aren’t trying to protect African-American teens forced to walk through metal detectors on their way into school. Or Mexican-American teens enduring the culturally schizophrenic life of being American citizens and the children of illegal immigrants. Or Native American teens growing up on Third World reservations. Or poor white kids trying to survive the meth-hazed trailer parks. They aren’t trying to protect the poor from poverty. Or victims from rapists.

No, they are simply trying to protect their privileged notions of what literature is and should be. They are trying to protect privileged children. Or the seemingly privileged.

As a child, I read because books—violent and not, blasphemous and not, terrifying and not—were the most loving and trustworthy things in my life. . . I read books about monsters and monstrous things, often written with monstrous language, because they taught me how to battle the real monsters in my life (Alexie 2011).

Alexie gestures to rifts in the present that endanger some children, that entangle them in forms of violence and cruelties that constitute a ‘negative’ or “darkly themed” space on the identitarian borders of childhood.

In *Huck's Raft*, Steven Mintz complements Alexie's argument by offering a sustained historical study of American childhood in which he seeks to "strip away the myths, misconceptions, and nostalgia" that contribute to adult pessimism about the young's emotional and psychological capacity to withstand difficult knowledge. He chronicles the rise of the sheltered child as a literary and visual trope in the American social landscape and marshals historical examples (of child labor, slavery, colonial mistreatment) to bolster his argument that for most children, childhood has never been a time of innocence. The past has never safely held up their world. As he writes: "Childhood has never been insulated from the pressures and demands of the surrounding society, and each generation of children has had to wrestle with the social, political, and economic constraints of its own historical period" (2004, vii). Mintz offers a historical materialist perspective on the politics surrounding the idea of protected childhoods. In other words, the belief in protecting children needs to be historicized in view of what Philippe Aries called "centuries of childhood" (1965).⁶⁸

Katharine Capshaw Smith underscores these recurrent tensions in her study of children's texts of the Harlem Renaissance. Tracing the ways black childhood was imagined by black writers of the 1920s and 1930s, she writes: "attention to nature and to staples of children's fantasy literature, like fairyland, suggests much about the desire of black writers to offer children a space insulated from racial strife. However, like poet

⁶⁸ In *Centuries of Childhood* Philippe Aries argues that a modern culture of childhood began to emerge in the seventeenth century and with it a theory of innocence. Children were to be protected from adult reality. See also: *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* by Viviana Zelizer, which traces the "sacralization" of 'the child' in popular literature and culture at the turn of the nineteenth century when children ceased to be common wage-earners in Western industrial society. For Zelizer, "sacralization" involved investing the child (formerly economically useful as a source of labor) "with sentimental or religious meaning" and value (11). But as others have observed, this dubious honor and burden was attributed almost exclusively to very privileged white children and not generally equated with children of color for whom experiences of class and race served as a form of desacralization

Effie Lee Newsome's important children's page in *Crisis* magazine (1925-30), nature poetry often discloses an awareness of the black child's political position and vacillates between offering refuge from racism through nature and fantasy and using the landscape as a means to bolster the child's sense of racial pride in anticipation of social conflict" (132).

The point here is that efforts to protectively censor children, and questions of 'what should and do children know,' continue to shape contemporary debates about children's culture. The tensions are recurrent in a world that for many young people is "scrungier and rougher and dangerouser than it ever was before" (Maurice Sendak quoted in Warrick, 1993), a world in which some children are *already wounded* by racism, poverty, war, displacement, genocide, and other human rights violations.

In this context, a distrust of the blithe and bucolic can be read as an ethical posture. It is, after all, the most iniquitous societies—not just the openly fascist ones (say Germany of the 1940s or white South Africa of the 1970s)—that are more inclined to overcoddle their privileged young and suppress moral and emotional uneasiness. Sheltered youth are a hallmark of oppression and segregation. Children may not be responsible for systemic injustice and suffering but they are implicated in, and may benefit from, its relationships of power.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ In *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*, Robin Bernstein explores the racism and Eurocentric values implicit in nineteenth-century American understandings of childhood innocence. To be innocent, she argues, was "to be innocent *of* something, to achieve obliviousness...obliviousness was not merely an absence of knowledge, but an active state of repelling knowledge—the child's 'holy ignorance'" (6). Significant for my project is her assertion that a "state of holy obliviousness" to worldly concerns has been central to the construction and preservation of white affluent childhood (7). Whereas knowing or bearing too much is intrinsic to the experience of social oppression borne by children from historically marginalized and impoverished communities. Most poignantly, Bernstein notes that a black child with too much experience can be "dechilded".

In the context of environmental damage, the binary opposing a “guilty adult” generation and an “innocent youth” generation begins to break down over questions of culpability and carbon impact. Does human-induced climate change not render the mantle of innocence absurd?

In light of these concerns and ongoing discussions about the ‘harmfulness’ or ‘helpfulness’ of trauma literature, I propose that it is time to develop a more complex account of how children relate to difficult topics/conditions, an approach that might allow us to look beyond the lens of a false dichotomy and beyond opposing positions of innocence and experience.

Donna Haraway’s famous rejection of a politics of innocence is pertinent here. In “A Cyborg Manifesto” (1991) Haraway looked to speculative feminisms and science fiction to imagine new myths that refuse the pure and innocent future imagined and defended by ecological politics. The cyborg, Haraway declares, “is outside salvation history. ... it has no truck with ... organic wholeness...” (150) It is “oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence” (151). Forsaking the failed, flickering dream of the pristine self, Haraway turns toward processes of tarnished and embedded construction.

Kathryn Bond Stockton (2009) similarly rejects the construction of modern childhood as a state of innocence before the inescapable descent into a normative adulthood. This ideal is founded on an inherent violence, in Stockton’s view, because it hinges on a notion of smooth teleological development that forecloses queer and lateral possibilities. Rebekah Sheldon’s *The Child To Come* raises related concerns about the use of the child figure as a symbol of environmental futurity built on a foundation of

“[heterosexual] reproduction” (2016, 58). Each of these scholars makes the case for recasting a child figure that is not totally innocent yet still deserving of adult protection—a child in the process of becoming.

Exposing a World of Wounds

It bears noting that the ‘exposure model’—the idea that trauma or exposure narratives have a therapeutic and testimonial role to play in childhood development—has not acquired the same moral force or suasion when it comes to topics related to environmental loss. Exposure to the Holocaust (even in the face of possible anxiety and despair) is widely accepted as appropriate and even “necessary” if we are to cultivate ethical citizens and prevent future genocides. As Kidd argues, there is widespread agreement that “we no longer have the luxury of denying the existence of or postponing the child’s confrontation with evil” (Kidd 2005, 120–121). By contrast, the stakes of childhood ignorance and knowledge in the face of climate change remain murky. Environmental issues remain at the margins of schooling. Climate change is only gradually emerging as an ‘urgent’ narrative project in literary, psychological, and theoretical discourse.⁷⁰ While there may be unanimity among scientists about the changing climate, the question “is there an ethical imperative to teach about climate change?” elicits a more fragmented response.⁷¹ Research findings by the Pennsylvania

⁷⁰ Note: *Teaching Climate Change in the Humanities* (2017) is the first textbook to guide the teaching of climate change in university-level humanities classes. *A People’s Curriculum for the Earth Teaching about the Environmental Crisis* (2014) is an educator’s toolkit geared towards school-age children.

⁷¹ According a February 2016 report in *The Guardian*, the average American student spends “only an hour or two in the course of an academic year learning about climate change in middle and high school... Only 38% of American schoolchildren were taught lessons that adhere to the scientific consensus that climate change is largely the result of the burning of fossil fuels The lack of teaching and the mixed messages about climate change leave schoolchildren more susceptible to disinformation about climate change spread by political or corporate interests once they enter adulthood, the researchers said. The energy industry has spent millions funding climate denial and supporting Republicans in Congress who deny global warming is

State University and the National Centre for Science Education suggest “that younger generations, those most likely to experience the havoc and stress of climate change in their lifetimes, are not getting the education to best serve their needs.”⁷² (One cannot underestimate the power of the oil and coal lobbies in shaping notions of urgency and curricular priority. For mining towns and communities heavily invested in the extractive industries, teaching about climate change whether through science-based learning or literature may simply be too much ‘exposure,’ i.e. too heavy a dose of reality.)

Aside from conservative attempts to foreclose climate change conversation altogether, I remain sympathetic to concerns about psychic and emotional bombardment. I also understand the tendency to focus away from environmental ‘problems’ and instead on children’s participation in environmental stewardship/conservation and outdoor learning more generally—a ‘solution-oriented’ focus popularized by the work of Richard Louv (2006) and David Sobel (1996). As topics for children, the Holocaust and climate change clearly offer very different challenges, but both require some measure of pedagogical delicacy and creativity in making encounters with terror and difficulty *generative*, as opposed to merely *punitive*.

There is an evocative quote by Aldo Leopold that speaks to the difficulty that many parents, educators and writers find themselves in. He writes: “One of the penalties

occurring.” <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/feb/11/two-thirds-of-us-students-are-taught-climate-change-badly-study-finds> Some might argue that the minimal time allotted to climate change in classes should be spent on the more urgent relaying of testable, evidentiary climate science. I reject this as a false choice. I propose throughout my research and writing that climate change requires thinking across the disciplines (from the sciences to the humanities) and that art offers an ethical and aesthetic supplement and a way of protecting a vision of humane science that draws its power from the subtle and sensitive pedagogy of storytelling.

⁷² See: Goldberg, S. (2016). Two-thirds of US students are taught climate change badly, study finds. *The Guardian*. 11 February. Retrieved from: <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/feb/11/two-thirds-of-us-students-are-taught-climate-change-badly-study-finds>

of an ecological education is that one lives... in a world of wounds.” To live in a world of wounds it to live with the knowledge of loss—rainforest destruction, widespread species extinction, catastrophic climate disruption and human displacement. To live in a world of wounds is to know that on March 1, 2016, average temperatures across the Northern Hemisphere breached the 2 degrees Celsius above “normal” mark for the first time in recorded history, and possibly since the beginning of human civilization. To live in such a world is to feel the unease and foreboding that are natural responses to such dangerous climate milestones.

As a parent and children’s author, there are moments that I wish to sound the siren and speak with candor about the depths of my earth-sadness. There are moments when I feel myself becoming the conveyor of a grim eco-education. Yet I remain aware that a curriculum overburdened by this difficult ecological inheritance is bound up with the ethical problem of agency. Most children—my own included—are relatively powerless (though not completely disempowered) within our relentlessly extractive, hyperconsumptive political economy.⁷³

While I fully believe that children, as adults, can be presented with challenging stories and knowledge, I am interested in how we find ways to lovingly support them in their struggle to make life meaningful, and how we might cultivate ecological thoughtfulness and tenderness in a world that often feels wracked by thoughtlessness and cruelty. Part of this, of course, involves acknowledging that many children already

⁷³ Beryl Langer notes: “The fact remains, however, that capitalist childhood at the turn of the 21st century is embedded in an all-encompassing product universe through which children’s identity is negotiated in terms of consumer choice. By 1999, global sales of toys alone (including video games) totaled \$71 billion – a fraction of children’s contribution to corporate profit through the purchase of food, drink, licensed clothing, sneakers, sports equipment, computers, movies and theme park attendance” (2002, 70).

experience climate impacts in their own lives, or will in the near future. In Canada and elsewhere, Indigenous communities, whose livelihood, culture and wellbeing are intimately connected to land and landscapes, feel these impacts most acutely. To address the wider scope of climate change means recognizing how the dominant framing of trauma/events may obstruct from view the timescape of slow violence (Nixon 2013)—a timescape of complex and embedded relations within which the notion of a sovereign human subject imagined “as a seat of awareness, bounded by the skin and set over against the world” (Ingold 2000, 243) feels increasingly tenuous. Having literature and art that reflects this fragile, exposed and interconnected situation and that models ways of coping in different scenarios (without erasing the material realities of childhood vulnerability and dependence) can be an invaluable gift.

For those children who feel less directly impacted, art (in the form of imaginative literature, visual texts, film) can provide a provocative yet ‘enchanted’ space for exposure, experience, and confrontation to occur. This is not an easy or straightforward project. Stories of ‘climate change’ often feel generalized and unfocused or overly localized and specific. Occasionally a story will imprint itself on collective awareness but the struggle to bring the climate crisis into significance is ongoing. Art and literature may get the ball rolling, open lively and engaging passageways towards signification, allow big issues to be presented in an accessible manner and subtly enough that adults can guide children to an age-appropriate understanding. The challenge as always is to find ways of bridging the “‘split agenda’ between truth telling and reassurance” (Goodenough and Immel 2008, 10).

Increasingly, I have found myself considering the role of fantasy and fairy tale in

stories of environmental collapse. In particular, and as I will soon elaborate, I have been thinking about the films of Japanese director Hayao Miyazaki as a possible model for thinking past polarities of protection and preparedness in environmental education. Celebrated worldwide for his daring and philosophical approach to animation, Miyazaki brings to life “intricate fantasy realms” simultaneously evoking “a sense of freedom” and “a harrowing vision of life’s darker facets” (Cavallaro 2006, 5).⁷⁴ His mode for over thirty years has been to draw viewers to the edge of the ordinary, to strip away conventions of rationality, so as to create a portal where one feels anything at all can happen—including the terrible and the wondrous.

In Miyazaki’s world, reassurance is not prized over confrontation. Recognition is not privileged over estrangement.⁷⁵ Again and again, Miyazaki tests our empathy and our narcissism by featuring characters that may initially resemble us (‘humans’), only to have them burst out of their recognizable shapes and twist into something bizarrely ‘other’. Actually, to say ‘us’ and ‘other’ is to miss the point. There are no tidy binaries in his work. Miyazaki mingles and fuses good and evil, flesh and spirit, the living and the dead, masculine and feminine, the smooth and spiky, human and more-than-human, creating ambiguous figures that in scholar/poet Joan Retallack’s words “wobble, slip, slide, elide, combine, recombine, morph, mongrelize” (2003, 99). Things are logical but they are also wildly fantastical. As a viewer, this creates a feeling of things moving in directions one cannot predict in advance.

⁷⁴ Awarded an Honorary Oscar (Lifetime Achievement Award) in 2014, Hayao Miyazaki joined a list of cinematic luminaries including Akira Kurosawa, Jean-Luc Godard, and Satyajit Ray.

⁷⁵ As Susan Napier writes: “The viewer finds in each film a topography that is exotic... but at the same time so richly realized down to minute details that it seems at least potentially contiguous to our own world” (2005, 122-23).

It bears noting that fantasy in popular opinion tends to connote something commercially palatable, escapist and diversionary. In young children's cinema, fantasy is often seen to traffic in falsehoods and pleasantries but I would suggest that Miyazaki offers a more complex portrait of the fantastical. Working within a genre 'presumed to be innocent,' i.e. the animated family feature, he tests the boundaries of 'safe' childhoods and 'monstrous' worlds.

His beautiful, family-oriented fantasy films tend to pivot around end-of-the-world scenarios but consistently, through a painterly and almost haptic portrayal of nature, offer a view of what David Sobel calls "ecophilia" or a turning towards the earth that has been abused and disparaged. (Without introducing a love and delight in nature, Sobel proposes, we run the risk of children becoming dissociated from the earth as opposed to connected to it.)⁷⁶ In the semi-wild spaces of childhood, Miyazaki's child protagonists express protectiveness towards the often wild and difficult environments that surround them and find ways of relating to feral creatures both real and imagined. Distances associated with remote ecosystems and even remoter environmental problems are made intimate.⁷⁷

Fantastic and Enchanting

In *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, the child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim makes a case for difficult and even violent fairy tales,

⁷⁶ A more nuanced, posthuman, new materialist version of this stance can be found in Stacy Alaimo's *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (2016). Alaimo argues that we need to embrace a roster of polymorphous posthuman pleasures if we wish to address anthropogenic climate change.

⁷⁷ Storyteller Brenda Peterson reminds us that, "By telling their own animal stories, children are practicing ecology at its most profound and healing level. Story as ecology – it's so simple, something we've forgotten. In our environmental wars, the emphasis has been on saving species, not becoming them" (quoted in Sobel 1998).

arguing that they encourage children to do the emotional growing that will better prepare them for their own futures. In building his defense of the ‘bibliotherapeutic’ importance of fantasy, he critiques parents and educators who seek to "protect" children by sanitizing the stories they encounter. Instead, Bettelheim proposes that the enduring appeal and power of fairy tales arises from the fact that through darkness, terror and enchantment, they offer children a safe, indirect way to work through feelings and impulses that would otherwise remain bottled up in their conscious, rational lives.

At the heart of Bettelheim’s compelling if flawed exploration is a beautiful thesis that fairy tales teach children *how to live*. It is a thesis that embraces non-representational literature as part of a cosmology of becoming, and that sees in the extra-logical fable a space in which to create possibility and scenarios for the future. Building on this thesis, fairy tale scholar and anthologist Kate Bernheimer has championed fairy tales as an antidote to the “egocentric linearity of the self.” She laments that enchantment is imperiled in the West’s prevailing culture of literary realism and writes: “Like the sea, threatened now by our changing climate, fairy tales, too, are in danger today—their tropes pirated by people really uninterested in wonder.”⁷⁸

In this radical view, the ‘wonder’-full story emerges as a vehicle for conceiving new social patterns. This is not the typical view of “fantasy” or “fairy tale” that we tend to conflate with mass consumer culture and escapist entertainment. Nor is this a view of fantasy that turns its sights inward, cordoning itself off from “real” world implications.

⁷⁸ Challenging boundary categories of the real and unreal, Bernheimer notes that, “In the late 1950’s, Italo Calvino named folklore the ‘true’. Ursula Le Guin, whose books have been marginalized as genre fiction, has long named science fiction and fantasy our most ‘plausible’ literature.” See: “A Terrible Twist” <http://www.katebernheimer.com/images/A%20Terrible%20Twist.pdf>

What Kate Bernheimer values about non-mimetic narrative is its engagement with active, alternative, otherworldly constructions of reality.

In *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, Jane Bennett goes a step further to wager that a mood of enchantment or a state of wonder may be indispensable to an “ethical life”(3). When a cultural narrative of alienation and disenchantment prevails, Bennett argues, “the prospects for loving life—or saying ‘yes’ to the world—are not good” (2010, 4). To be enchanted, from this vantage point, is to turn against nihilistic disconnection towards joyful and complex attachments. It is to meet the “as yet unprocessed encounter”(5) or “metamorphing creatures” (17) and see the world anew (including its disturbing aspects), with sharpened senses, as a “collection of singularities” (5). This is the foundation of ethics.

It is unfortunate that enchantment is so often confused with mindless optimism. It is both unfortunate and misleading that fantasy has become synonymous with its more commercially overblown and formally hermetic examples—especially given the rich history of socially engaged fantasy writers (from the Surrealists onwards). As one of the more radical fantasists, China Miéville, reminds us:

[T]here's something fundamentally important and radical about the ability to conceptualise the impossible—the fantastic—for the human mind... When you tell a fantasy story you pretend that things that you know to be *impossible* are not only possible but *real*... That is a psychologically and aesthetically radical thing to do--it allows us a kind of sleight of mind, because redefine the 'impossible' and you're changing the categories within the not-real... change the not-real and that allows you differently *to think the potentialities in the real* (Newsinger 2000).

The fantastic, in Miéville’s account, is not a closed affirmationist system that reasserts the feel-good conventions of humanism.⁷⁹ It does not shy away from negativity and bad

⁷⁹ For discussions on the radical uses of negativity in signifying worlds-to-come see: *Willful Subjects* by Sara Ahmed (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); *Ordinary Affects* by Kathleen Stewart (Durham:

affects (i.e. emotions such as sadness, guilt, shame, upset, etc.) It invites leakage. It beckons impossibilities. It arises from the falling apart and ‘becoming undone’ of norms of everyday life. In Miéville’s own novels, fantasy is where worlds are both made and shattered. It is a foundation upon which to challenge the violent chauvinisms and extractive legacies that constitute the ‘Anthropocene’.

Hayao Miyazaki’s own commitment to fantasy is woven with concern for social and ecological relationships. It is through the fusion of fantasy and ‘reality’—through a “mood of enchantment or that strange combination of delight and disturbance”—that Miyazaki challenges, even rejects, the split between protected and prepared childhoods (Bennett 2010, Xi). Using a blend of wonder and apocalypse, recognition and estrangement, he presents themes that might be overwhelming in a strictly realist or live action film. In his depictions of child protagonists navigating stormy worlds, for instance, he offers child viewers wonder-full and creature-filled spaces in which to imagine their own resilience, cunning, and imagination. These are not two-dimensional portraits of childhood. On the contrary, Miyazaki’s films feature children who have complex, dramatic inner lives and who often face the unsettling transfiguration of once-familiar terrain. For example, in *Spirited Away* (2001), Miyazaki imaginatively captures a child’s frightening loss of adult authority and the spiritual challenges that emerge when a safe world suddenly becomes threatening.

There are different ways of combating ecological despair, or exiting the cul-de-sac of apocalyptic fatalism. One way is to imagine alternative futures that are

Duke University Press, 2007), *Cruel Optimism* by Lauren Berlant (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). *Depression: A Public Feeling* by Ann Cvetkovich (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); and *The Promise of Happiness* by Sara Ahmed (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

determinedly less forlorn than “the post-apocalyptic cli-fi pastiche” that has become western culture’s default (Klein 2014, 420). For Miyazaki, fantasy is a means of tapping children into deep social, environmental and aesthetic undercurrents without annihilating the possibility of transformation. In this sense, ‘telling stories’ is not antithetical to ‘being in the world.’ As Miyazaki puts it:

When children face complicated or difficult problems, they have to dodge at first. They would surely lose if they tried to tackle it head-on. We don't need to use a complex and questionable phrase such as "escaping from reality"...I have no doubt about the power of fantasy itself. Still, it is true that the creators of fantasy are getting emotionally weaker. Surely more and more people are saying, "I can't believe such a thing." But it's just that a fantasy that can confront this complicated era has not been created yet (Miyazaki 2001).

In films such as *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988), *Spirited Away* (2001), and *Ponyo* (2008), Miyazaki offers beautiful hand-drawn imagery and cleverly magical situations. But he also features young protagonists who face pain, dread, and even traumatic events. In *Totoro* the event is a mother's serious illness, in *Spirited Away* it is the loss of both parents (who alarmingly metamorphose into pigs), and in *Ponyo* it is a devastating tsunami that engulfs a fishing village and results in the disappearance of a five-year-old boy's mother.

Fantasy bolsters the child protagonists. In *Totoro* the two sisters find a giant woodland creature (mute and untamed) that helps them through moments of uncertainty and despair as they await their mother’s return from hospital.⁸⁰ In *Spirited Away* the 10-year-old lead character finds camaraderie while working in a bathhouse for the gods. And in *Ponyo* the boy and his magical fish-girl friend board a toy boat that permits them to

⁸⁰ The true genre of the fantastic, according to the literary critic Tzvetan Todorov, “contains works in which the moment of hesitation remains unresolved, leaving the viewer/reader in a state of uncertainty. This is essentially what happens in *Totoro*, where the fantastic world that the children discover could be either supernatural or an expression of their own imaginations” (Napier 2005, 157).

travel through the flooded town and reunite with the boy's mother.

Miyazaki's popularity is vast. His films, full of beauty and apocalyptic disquiet and gentle messages about consumerism, the environment, and nontraditional gender/age roles, have transcended the category of 'children's animation.' They have found besotted fans across generational lines, consistently breaking box office records in Japan and winning international film awards, including the 2003 Academy Award (Animated Feature) for *Spirited Away*.

Some critics, including Miyazaki scholar Susan Napier, have wondered about this popularity and specifically whether children occupy a reactionary space in Miyazaki's work tied to the romanticization of a simpler, less cosmopolitan past. As Napier writes: "Although the director is careful to make his child protagonists quite realistic—even sullen, bratty or petty at times—their essential innocence highlights their role as embodying hope for the future. Furthermore, the child's connection with the elemental—through play, sensation and wonder—makes them particularly appropriate vehicles for full participation in the 'mess' that apocalypse creates" (Napier 2012).

Children slide between myths in Miyazaki's films. They are "not only innocent, they are also extremely resourceful, rising capably to challenges that would overwhelm the average adult" (Napier 2012). There is a bit of the child redeemer in many of his heroes but I would propose that there are two aspects that complicate any simple figuration. First, the child/youth characters are usually supported by caring elderly protagonists, who share the burden of averting destruction and fashioning a better world. (He implies with these elder figures that children need intergenerational/interspecies community and authority and should not be expected to handle the saving of the planet

on their own. Gone is the fantasy of self-reliance. Survival must be collaborative.)

Secondly, Miyazaki depicts childhood minds in action—as *thinking* (through) rather than *knowing* (in advance). It is not innate innocence, wisdom or divinity that makes these children so capacious and captivating. It’s their comparative freedom from the task-minded, self-optimising business of modern adult living. For these characters there are no divinely possessed answers or messianic promises, just a commitment to muddle through the murk, to experiment, to find out, to try on. Significantly, Miyazaki extends the usual repertory of heroic attributes to include failure and fallibility. Film reviewers frequently note his refusal to mount his characters as fixed Manichean symbols of good and evil.

In this way, Miyazaki offers fresh and potentially radical routes for thinking about environmental participation and citizenship. As I have written elsewhere: “The project, when we move away from narrow ideas of ‘rightness,’ is not so much how to save the world or how to ‘fix’ its suffering but how to respond to the suffering, how to improvise and participate creatively (and collaboratively) in the unfinishable project of creating a better future. When there is an emergency or crisis, we will respond, but not thoughtlessly, not with oversimplifications.”⁸¹ The old ameliorative story of human didactics, of adults ‘schooling’ children, of children ‘effecting change’ through education, falls short at a time in which humanity’s relationships within the (Anthropocenic) world and to each other have changed.

Perhaps now more than ever, consideration needs to be given to the challenge of decentering the human within the humanist project of education and to rethinking subject

⁸¹ See: Maclear, K. (2016). Pedagogy of an Empty Hand: What are the goods of education? What is teaching good for?” *Curriculum Inquiry*, 46 (1), 98-109.

formations, including ‘the child’ as a ‘becoming-knowing agent,’ which rely on residual notions of human supremacy. In Miyazaki’s world, we catch a glimpse of other decentred possibilities. We enter a realm where more-than-human agencies and subjectivities share the foreground and where nature/culture dualisms (dividing the world into actors and the acted upon) are jostled and overturned.

The “Vibrant Matter” of Animation

Hundreds of glowing jellyfish pulsate across the screen in *Ponyo* (2008), blazing blue, with hints of red. Down, down we dive, past sea life of all species and hue. In *Spirited Away* (2001), the wind rustles through rippling fields of grass, leaves glitter in the rays of the sun. In *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988), wordless sequences of a monsoon soaked landscape and a lingering view of a camphor tree capture a vital and breathing world. For Miyazaki, matter is vital and vibrant. Atmosphere is as important as action. This is the art of slow cinema with time to savor, time for long-takes and gaps that don’t advance the plot.

Animation has long been an outlaw genre, embracing the anarchic and creaturely, appealing to the senses through visually sumptuous detail.⁸² What Miyazaki adds to this tradition is his commitment to materiality, slow labour, and hand-drawn characters on lushly hand-painted backgrounds. While most blockbuster animated films in North America rely heavily on computer graphics, Miyazaki has remained dedicated to an

⁸² “Miyazaki’s films,” as Dani Cavallaro observes, “bear witness to a keen understanding of animation as the most unfettered and potentially the most creative cinematic form thanks to its knack of transcending the laws of physics and biology, as well as flouting the expectations of logic and mimesis with carnivalesque gusto” (2006, 3).

analog process of crafting moving images. The effect is an ineffable sense of liveliness, a quality of flicker, life, pulse and warmth. Background landscapes and natural elements are given languid and loving attention. A wordless scene of falling rain, for example, might make a compelling character out of rain itself.

Miyazaki himself asserts that the most important characteristic distinguishing the animation of Studio Ghibli is its depiction of non-human nature. It is a comportment that encourages visceral emotional attachments to the substance of the world and which sees nature's value as intrinsic rather than a vehicle for moving a human story forward.

As he explains, “We don't subordinate the natural setting to the characters... That is because we feel that the world is beautiful. Human relationships are not the only thing that is interesting. We think that weather, time, rays of light, plants, water, and wind—what make up the landscape—are all beautiful. That is why we make efforts to incorporate them as much as possible in our work” (quoted in Shunsuke 2015).⁸³ At the same time, Miyazaki does not shy away from depicting nature's terrifying power. For example, in *Ponyo* (2008) the sea rises up and submerges an entire town. In *Princess Mononoke* (1997), the forest world defends itself with awesome and bloody fury.

Miyazaki's work—characterized by its deep engagement with animals and shape-shifting creatures, and its animistic approach to the supposedly inanimate—recognizes myriad forms of life affected by environmental decline. This is a far cry from viewing the environment as an inert resource. Tonally unusual, his films offer a beautiful and unique perspective on intergenerational and interspecies care, evoking what Jane Bennett describes in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* as a “commonality with the

⁸³ “Miyazaki has stated consistently that while he is drawn to the animation of Walt Disney, he is uncomfortable with Disney's cloyingly artificial, sanitized portrayal of nature” (Shunsuke 2015).

out-side” and a call “to treat nonhumans—animals, plants, earth, even artifacts and commodities—more carefully, more strategically, more ecologically” (2010, 18). What emerges is an ethic inspired by a sense of all bodies being “enmeshed in a dense network of relations” where harm to one element may very well be harm to oneself (Bennett, 13).⁸⁴ Miyazaki does not simply invite us to embrace the ecological; he models such an embrace through his aesthetic and narrative approach. His films brim with visual pleasure, and take us to a place where wildness is foregrounded, where the cinematic point of view continuously shifts away from the human-centric and narratively utilitarian. There are moments of quiet lingering that Miyazaki describes as moments of *ma*, or emptiness.⁸⁵ Whatever arises in these moments is allowed full freedom of expression.

In *Animacies*, Mel Chen shows how normative concepts of ‘the human’ and notions of sentience and “lifeliness” (2012, 29) continue to regulate divisions between animate and inanimate beings. The hierarchy of value, according to Chen, moves from inanimate ‘dead things’ (e.g. stones and minerals) believed to have no agency through to vegetables (also non-vertebrates, small insects) on to expanded levels of agency in larger animals, mammals, children, women, and, ultimately, Man. Chen (like Miyazaki) questions the underpinnings of this hierarchy and its “stubborn binary systems of difference, including dynamism/stasis, life/death, subject/object, speech/nonspeech, human/animal, natural body/cyborg” (3). The concern is with epistemologies and narratives that build worlds that cannot hold all of us. In response, Chen puts forward

⁸⁴ “By ‘vitality,’” Jane Bennett explains, “I mean the capacity of things – edibles, commodities, storms, metals – not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans, but also to act as quasi-agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own. My aspiration is to articulate a vibrant materiality that runs alongside and inside humans to see how analyses of political events might change if we gave the force of things more due” (2010, viiii).

⁸⁵ See: Miyazaki, H. (2002). “Hayao Miyazaki Interview.” Interview with Roger Ebert. <http://www.rogerebert.com/interviews/hayao-miyazaki-interview>

‘animacy’ as a construct more generous and sensitive to the polymorphous character of the planet than categories such as “life” or “liveliness.” In Chen’s words, “animacy has the capacity to rewrite conditions of intimacy, engendering different communalisms and revising biopolitical spheres, or, at least, how we might theorize them” (3).

Jack Halberstam supports Chen’s new materialist view in a discussion of animated storytelling. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam proposes that the “whimsical nature of the animated world” (43) invites viewers to explore anarchic “ideas about humanness, alterity and alternative imaginaries” (33). In Miyazaki’s work, for example, the human is placed “firmly within a universe of multiple modes of being” (33). Here, conventional stories about individual struggle are supplanted by “stories of collective action, anti-capitalist critique, group bonding and alternative imaginings of community, space, embodiment and responsibility”(43-44).

As a writer I am in thrall to forms of storytelling that manage to evoke the altered earth, its myriad non-human creatures and life forms as conscious or unconscious agents. I have not yet discovered how to write from a place of entwined existence. The genres I tend to inhabit (novels, children’s books, memoirs) are not in the habit of displacing or decentering the human. And, yet, I am reminded that the tradition of human centrism hasn’t always prevailed in literature. As Amitav Ghosh notes in *The Great Derangement*, some of the “old realists” paid careful heed to nonhuman presences. In John Steinbeck’s work, Ghosh notes, we see “a visionary placement of the human within the nonhuman; we see a form, an approach that grapples with climate change avant la lettre” (80).

Reading Ghosh, I am reminded of the indefatigable turtle on the road in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The person who first drew my attention to the turtle crossing, a chapter

tangential to the plot of human activities throughout the novel, is Canadian novelist Kathryn Kuitenbrouwer. We once spent time discussing the turtle's rogue presence, its lack of narrative function. We wondered: would the turtle have survived a modern-day edit?

The occasion was a literary panel on the theme of rewilding. The question: how can we use narrative to re-imagine our relation to nature? Kathryn's focus was stories "where flora and fauna merge with humankind, remind humankind of its decentralized position, troubling humankind over against a civilized self, and creating another sort of world where nature maintains a foothold." Her list of texts included Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1712), stories from Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Books* (1894, 1895), J.M. Barrie's *Peter and Wendy* (1911)—all "instances of 'nature' knowing or reclaiming itself as paramount."⁸⁶

I remember nodding, thinking that a similar ecocentric perspective could be found in Miyazaki (and in the luscious work of Malick, Tarkovsky, Kiarostami) and other filmmakers who are gently striving to reimagine our place in the world and in the larger biotic scheme of things.

That we are one among many is a basic tenet of Miyazaki's oeuvre. It influences his vision of change. Moving beyond easy answers to environmental problems (i.e. recycle, buy green, turn out lights, and consume less), what he offers is a deeper politics, an ethic of care, a shifting of the ontologies and animacies that are seen to matter, that encompasses not just pristine forests and gorgeous meadows but also 'spoiled', 'wounded' and 'dead' spaces—such as our litter-filled oceans and pollution-ridden cities.

⁸⁶ See: <http://kathrynkuitenbrouwer.com/events/canadian-writers-summit-toronto/>

Articulating this ethic of care as a form of *courteousness*, Miyazaki has said, "we need courtesy toward water, mountains and air in addition to living things. We should not ask courtesy from these things, but we ourselves should give courtesy to them instead" (Miyazaki 1996).

While there is a tendency to position the 'natural world' contra the 'industrial world' in films such as *Princess Mononoke* (1997), there is also a sense that the 'Anthropocenic' planet has been irrecoverably mongrelized or 'altered.' Relationships among nature, culture and technology are interwoven and indissoluble, the limits and boundaries between them increasingly hard to determine. Miyazaki's vision is to imagine ways of living in such compromised and broken worlds.

Nevertheless, no matter how expansive Miyazaki's vision may be, there are questions of circulation and reception, which need to be addressed. To what extent is Miyazaki's vision shaped by 'family film' expectations? What, for instance, does a "G rating" do to a film about environmental apocalypse? And, finally, what happens when real world devastation meets whimsy in the work of Studio Ghibli?

The Case of Ponyo

In *Ponyo* (2008), a story inspired by Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid," a young boy named Sosuke discovers a strange goldfish with a human face near his seaside home. Sosuke and Ponyo become fast friends, but the fish-girl's father, a god-like undersea alchemist named Fujimoto, wants nothing to do with humankind. (Fujimoto blames humans for polluting the world's oceans.) Despite her father's virulent position, Ponyo yearns to become human, and transforms into a little girl, which awakens an ancient spell and causes an imbalance in nature. In the afterword to *Animacies*, Mel Chen

proposes that *Ponyo* models relationships across animacy hierarchies, that it is not “beholden to the failing categories of life and nonlife” (227). In this animated world, matter is vibrant. We see that “‘things’ (toys, nonhuman animals, rocks, sponges) are as lively as humans and...glimpse other worlds underlying and overwriting this one” (Halberstam 27-28).

Ponyo is considered to be one of Miyazaki's most ‘child-friendly’ movies.⁸⁷ It contains disturbing elements: images of a garbage-lined sea and humankind on the brink.⁸⁸ But when a giant tsunami rolls toward the coast in the middle of the movie, washing away buildings and flooding roads, the effect is more dreamlike than frightening. As one reviewer notes: “The roiling waves always seem to be a few feet above the protagonists, held back only by imagination” (Hartlaub 2009).

In her extensive discussion of *Ponyo*, Susan Napier agrees that Miyazaki presents a strangely positive view of the narrative’s tsunami—which is cast in “soft pastels, shot through with golden sunshine, as if taking place in a marvelous dream world” and accompanied by “lyrical and largely upbeat music.” She maintains that Miyazaki constructs a childproofed fantasy to protect the child viewer from despair and the “horror of the real” that might come from reckoning with the catastrophe and its after-effects. Echoing Bruno Bettelheim, she concludes that fantasy in Miyazaki’s films provides an almost therapeutic function—allowing viewers to “work through, rehearse and even perhaps do some pre-emptive thinking in relation to disaster”—what she calls “pre-traumatic stress syndrome.” She further writes that “In Miyazaki's cinematic world, these

⁸⁷ The English version features the voices of Cate Blanchett, Matt Damon, Tina Fey, Cloris Leachman, Liam Neeson, Lily Tomlin, and Betty White among others.

⁸⁸ One of the most frightening aspects of the film is the grown-up characters' apparent indifference to the disaster going on around them.

stresses vary from the supra personal, explicitly - world ending fantasies to more intimate traumas of parental abandonment” (2012).⁸⁹

Film reviewer Richard Corliss also queried *Ponyo*'s view of ‘optimistic catastrophe’ when the film debuted in Venice.

While Hurricane Gustav was chewing up Cuba and storming toward Louisiana, the screen of the Venice Film Festival's Sala Grande was showing a very sweet tsunami. In the animated movie *Ponyo*, the swelling waves take the form of dolphins, and when a Japanese coastal village gets submerged no one is killed or hurt — just amusingly displaced. The rising up of the marine world is not insurrection against humanity but gently cautionary instruction for it. Treat the oceans with respect, the movie says, and they will provide you with food and wonder.

That thesis might not be embraced by the tens of thousands swept away by the Indonesian tsunami, or the like number displaced by Katrina. But *Ponyo*, which the Disney Company will release in the States next year, is a parable for children, and they're entitled to the gift of hope (Corliss 2008).

Corliss's comments raise important questions about the imagination of disaster in children's film and literature (questions that were thrown into relief by real world events that surrounded the film's release): Is fantasy an appropriate mode for telling the story of environmental collapse? Are children entitled to the gift of hope? What about children who are experiencing not-so-sweet disasters? What does it mean to ‘gentle’ or ‘tame’ depictions of climate catastrophes in light of the very real trauma and upheaval they can inflict?

⁸⁹ Paula T. Connolly offers a similar perspective in an article titled “Surviving the Storm: Trauma and Recovery in Children's Books about Natural Disasters.” Discussing literature for children and young adults that depicts the devastation of natural disasters, particularly Hurricane Katrina (2005), Connolly addresses the challenge of honoring the scope of an environmental tragedy without overwhelming young readers. She examines three strains of narrative: the animal story (which avoids direct discussion of human trauma, providing an emotional buffer), the eye witness account (usually verbal/visual testimony from children) and YA fiction. She notes that the “assurance of recovery” is central to many of the stories she discusses and posits that stories play a role in “arming” children with the skills and means to survive catastrophic disaster and possible loss.

Looking back on *Ponyo* almost a decade after its release elicits mixed feelings in me. Its rendering of a gigantic tsunami that destroys a tranquil Japanese fishing village feels eerily prescient in light of the actual tsunami that leveled several cities in Japan and created the Fukushima disaster in March 2011.⁹⁰ I cannot stop seeing the ‘real’ tsunami on the dark scrim of my mind. The animated tidal wave shifts into something bleaker.

Susan Napier gives voice to similar feelings of uneasiness in an essay titled “The Anime Director, the Fantasy Girl and the Very Real Tsunami.” She writes: “The question I would like to ask Miyazaki is the following: How do you feel, after the very real disaster of the earthquake and the tsunami, about having created a film that centers around a fantasy tsunami?” (Napier 2012) She ends her essay with a fairly pointed critique (given her usual scholarly devotion to the work of Miyazaki). *Ponyo*’s problem, she concludes, is that it is a family film that ultimately cannot support the difficult and desolate vision introduced by Miyazaki: “Instead we are given an upbeat ending with a rather amorphous vision of love conquering all...The film ultimately shies away from its darkest implications, allowing its family audience to get remarkably close to apocalyptic trauma but finally providing them with an escape route from that condition” (2012).

There is a verge of menace but in pulling back from the brink it is flirting with, the story comes close to offering a festive view of danger.

Although Miyazaki is usually resistant to the idea of providing happy or

⁹⁰ The ongoing nuclear disaster at Fukushima Daiichi in Japan raises significant questions about Japanese forgetting and cultural amnesia, how a society is “readied” and made indifferent to its nuclear past and present through its youth culture, how a younger generation confronts the spectre of ongoing nuclear disaster and the continual fear of future climate-related disaster, and how dominant perceptions of childhood and their subversion have respectively immobilized and mobilized children/youth in Japan. As noted by Geoff Read in *The Kyoto Journal* (2013): “The twin pillars of childhood in Japan are cuteness—*kawaii!*—and the spirit to struggle on—*gambare!* Innocence and determination are protective in many ways, but they can also be limiting, making it difficult for children to express their uncertainty.”

comforting endings to his films, he does not openly reject the idea that fantasy might offer children consolation or a way of gentling difficult realities.⁹¹ He would certainly, given his commitment to the ‘family film’ genre, depart from a more extreme view of fantasy (for example, the Surrealist tradition) that rejects the idea of edification or reassurance altogether. But is this fantasy as consolation (as Napier and Corliss seem to suggest)? How does Miyazaki negotiate the ethical pull between comforting fictions and monstrous realities?

The Comfortable Horrible

In his writing on Holocaust remembrance, Avner Segall has argued that there are ways that traumatic knowledge can be rendered ‘innocent’ or ‘benign’ even as it is ‘exposed’. He highlights several of the pedagogical and curricular processes that contribute to assimilative framings of difficult themes: “Those might include a desire to protect the learner by avoiding knowledge that is likely to disturb his/her held worldviews or by framing the learning in ways that minimize the horror of the events described, preferring instead to produce what Linenthal (1995) termed a *comfortable horrible*.”

The “comfortable horrible” refers to any superficial narrative that not only pre-empts the delicate and hard work of symbolizing loss, but also obstructs the possibility of a more genuine solidarity that might, in our case, allow us to consider the unequally distributed effects of climate change or the uneven impact of habitat loss on human and non-human life forms. Segall’s thesis provides a way to consider how films such as

⁹¹ “I gave up making a happy ending in the true sense a long time ago. I can go no further than the ending in which the lead character gets over one issue for the time being. Many things will happen after this... I think that’s as far as I can go. From the standpoint of a movie maker, it would be easier if I could make a movie in which ‘everybody became happy because they defeated the evil villain.” (Miyazaki quoted in Cavallaro 2006, 6).

Ponyo present digestible narratives, thus promoting a consolatory vision of natural disaster that allows viewers to disavow “indigestible events” that would otherwise threaten their sense of social and emotional order. (Note: a prominent objection to consolatory fictions is that they tend to act in the service of “ameliorative and neoliberal agendas” [Gilmore and Marshal, 2013].)

Segall is not the first or the only scholar to have observed the paradox of the “comfortable horrible”. Writing on nuclear fictions for children, Tamar Hager has explored a tendency towards “domestication and trivialization” (2013, 132). The post-nuclear future, she argues, is often presented as a backdrop for “adventure stories about courageous young people, free at last from the restrictive authority of their elders”—a setting against which “children and adolescents can exercise their talents and resourcefulness” (132). There are various ways of sublimating and containing a threat that is considered “too overpowering for children” (134).

Over the past decade we have seen “the diffusion of environmental crisis” (Buell 2003, 257) into popular children’s culture, where narratives and images of the planet’s eco-collapse have proliferated (e.g. *Wall-E*, *Rango*, *Ice Age*, *Happy Feet*, *Lorax*, Studio Ghibli). What happens when environmental collapse becomes a ‘normal’ cultural topic framed within the terms of the “comfortable horrible” (Linenthal 1995)? Do efforts to avoid hopelessness and assuage viewers bring us one step closer to a gradual banalization of threats?

Susan Sontag articulated some of these concerns long ago in her essay “The Imagination of Disaster.” Awake to the risks of rendering the terrifying trivial, she wrote: “One job that fantasy can do is to lift us out of the unbearably humdrum and to distract us

from terrors, real or anticipated-by an escape into exotic dangerous situations which have last-minute happy endings. But another one of the things that fantasy can do is to normalize what is psychologically un-bearable, thereby inuring us to it. In the one case, fantasy beautifies the world. In the other, it neutralizes it” (1966). Ursula Heise echoes Sontag almost a half century later in a discussion of fantasy fiction. “Dystopia is flourishing,” she writes. “In the process, it is becoming routine and losing its political power...by now thoroughly familiar survivalist scenarios no longer seem particularly scary” (Heise 2015).

Miyazaki is alert to these tensions too. His relationship to the very word “fantasy” is an iterative and embattled one. In interviews he often cautions against the specious use of the term within consumer culture—applied to products that can be mindlessly digested with no imaginative participation or generative thinking on the part of the viewer. He continues to use the term warily, always struggling to define a vision of “free imagination” that can challenge the “banality of the real, the obviousness of everyday life” without conforming to a marketplace hungry for “well-confectioned fantasies” (Cavallaro 2015, 170). As he says:

[W]e have to be cautious in using this word fantasy. In Japan, the word fantasy these days is applied to everything from TV shows to video games, like virtual reality. But virtual reality is a denial of reality. We need to be open to the powers of imagination, which brings something useful to reality. Virtual reality can imprison people. It's a dilemma I struggle with in my work, that balance between imaginary worlds and virtual worlds (Miyazaki quoted in Mes, 2002).

Indeed, a recurring theme in Miyazaki interviews is his concern that children are abandoning ‘reality’ in favor of the image. Margaret Talbot, who wrote an extensive profile of Miyazaki for *The New Yorker*, states that she was surprised to discover “that he hates the idea that children watch his films repeatedly. He's very worried about kids

consuming too much media, and thinks that they should watch a movie like ‘Totoro’ no more than once a year” (2005).⁹²

“The Way We Protect Our Kids”

Miyazaki has more recently stated that he feels he can “no longer create fantasy in today’s world” (Napier 2014). As he moves towards retirement, his work seems increasingly devoted to non-cinematic interventions. In 2011, four months after Japan’s earthquake and tsunami, for example, Miyazaki and members of Studio Ghibli traveled to the worst affected areas to highlight the plight of the survivors. In an interview with CNN, he was asked how he felt when he first saw the pictures of the tsunami, “what went through your mind?” He replied: “I hope when I say, ‘I sort of expected it.’ That people don’t misunderstand me. I’ve done so much animation, the visuals were sort of there in my mind. I don’t want to be considered a cold onlooker, but that is how I felt at the time” (Miyazaki 2011).⁹³

I have thought deeply about Miyazaki’s response: the irony that a fantasist could be so limpid, that his worldly insight into what climate change actually portends for the future of the earth could be so entwined with his fanciful cinematic imagination. There is, I think, a corollary between Miyazaki’s artful embrace of the world’s vitalism and his

⁹² Miyazaki’s ‘media diet’ comment points to a paradox remarked upon by a reader of this chapter who noted: “the very act of watching *Ponyo* requires participating in ecological destruction.” For further reading on the “invisible” violence inscribed by media culture, please see: Jussi Parikka’s *The Anthroscene*. Parikka refuses to disavow or ignore the material impacts of seemingly ‘immaterial’ digital life, including the mining impacts linked to the computer age. Explaining the neologism “anthroscene,” he writes: “the addition of the obscene self-explanatory when one starts to consider the unsustainable, politically dubious, and ethically suspicious practices that maintain technological culture and its corporate networks” (2014, Introduction section, para. 13).

⁹³ Japan is an allegory of the limits of preparation. “For centuries, this country has lived with the feeling of constantly having to be prepared for the worst. Everything the Japanese have created over the centuries can be destroyed within seconds. No other country is as highly developed and simultaneously as directly at the mercy of the forces of nature. Miyazaki uses this contradiction repeatedly as a theme in his films” (Beier, Rapp and Reinhardt, 2011).

respect for the planet's capacity to reassert itself. Perhaps the "real mystery," to borrow Amitav Ghosh's words, lies not in Miyazaki's clear-sighted deference to nonhuman agency "but rather in how this awareness came to be suppressed in the first place, at least within the modes of thought and expression that have become dominant over the last couple of centuries" (Ghosh 65). It is our dominant cultures of storytelling, our scandalous self-regard, that is tested when nature surges from backdrop to foreground, when disaster strikes.

During his visit to Rikuzentakata, Iwate Prefecture, an area in a state of near ruin, Miyazaki held a special screening of his films at a local school, hoping to give "some much-needed relief to more than 800 young students still affected by the disaster" (Miyazaki 2011). It was a moving yet complicated testament to the limits and possibilities of fantasy in children's lives.

A few years later, in 2015, Miyazaki announced that he was spending \$2.5 million to build a nature sanctuary for children on Kumejima, a remote island in southern Japan about 55 miles west of Okinawa.⁹⁴ Scheduled for completion in 2018, the facility will be constructed within a virgin forest, taking care to integrate the buildings within the natural setting.

I would like to believe that Miyazaki has the answers, that this enchanted space he is creating will provide a model of collective "ecophilia" and cultivate the raw connection with nature that he evokes in his films. But how will we know and who's to tell? What

⁹⁴ See: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/film/movie-news/hayao-miyazaki-building-childrens-ghibli-nature-retreat/>

inspires me is his commitment to wrestle with the question of how to nurture an ethic of care towards the human and more-than-human world and his commitment to act in ways that might be visible and meaningful to children. What inspires is the tenderness and courtesy he shows his young characters who are loved for their singularity. We see this tenderness and courtesy when Mei (in *My Neighbour Totoro*) first encounters the giant Totoro—ambling clumsily onto the belly of this unfamiliar beast, but somehow intuiting from the snore and rhythm of his mighty breath that he is good. We see it in the way ten-year old Chihiro (in *Spirited Away*) is shown putting on her shoes, tapping the toe of each shoe to make sure it fits properly. These are stories told from the vantage point of the very small, stories that affiliate themselves with the vulnerable. It is not surprising, then, that Miyazaki's new project is about making provisions for actual children. His annual 'clean-up' of Fuchi no Mori forest on the outskirts of Western Tokyo is a further extension of this caretaking mindset and bound to his belief in long-term collective undertakings. Collective caretaking moves us beyond individualist ('reduce, recycle, reuse') consumer behavior and certainly beyond disassociation and resignation. It builds an affective commons in which we might dream, fall apart, become non-sovereign, grieve, palliate, mitigate, imagine and adapt *together*. It is how hope is prepared.

The millennial scale of ecosystem collapse, and the already 'locked in' damage to the biosphere, asks that we consider the nature of trauma and 'action' (whether our 'action' take the shape of "politics" or what we might call "aesthetics") from the standpoint of all constituents (forms, entities, forces). We are in it with others. This is both the ground of our vulnerability and our possible remaking.

In the spirit of Miyazaki (filmmaker and eco-citizen), I will leave the final words to Sandra Steingraber: “The way we protect our kids from terrible knowledge is not to hide the terrible knowledge, or change the subject, or even create an age-appropriate story about the terrible knowledge, but to let them watch us rise up in the face of terrible knowledge and do something” (2011).

CHAPTER THREE

Something So Broken: Black Care in the Wake of *Beasts of the Southern Wild*

"Care is the antidote to violence." —Saidiya Hartman at *In the Wake: A Salon in Honor of Christina Sharpe* (2017)

"The task is clear: to create a culture of caretaking in which no one and nowhere is thrown away." —Naomi Klein (2015)

"Y'all better learn how to survive now." —Miss Bathsheeba, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012)

LOUISIANA. A DARK BOILING SKY. *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (Dir. Benh Zeitlin, 2012)

opens in an anarchic place of car scrap and driftwood, feral animals and tumbledown shacks. We are at the end of the world in a swampy bayou, way out in the Gulf of Mexico. A young Black girl lays her hand against the body of a pig and tilts her head to listen for the heartbeat. A few moments later, she holds a baby bird to her ear, listens deep, eager to get to the heart of the matter. Animals, for this girl, are close as kin. Their heartbeats (which we also hear, thump-thump-thumping) bespeak the ebb and flow of life. As the girl's opening voiceover tells us: "All the time, everywhere, everything's hearts are beating and squirting, and talking to each other the ways I can't understand. Most of the time they probably be saying: I'm hungry, or I gotta poop. But sometimes they be talkin' in codes."

The heroine and narrator of *Beasts* is six-year-old "Hushpuppy," a preternaturally wise, motherless kid played with mesmerizing force by Quvenzhané Wallis. When we meet her she is stomping around her cardboard-and-tin home dressed only in a dirty undershirt, panties and rubber boots. Semi-orphaned, Hushpuppy lives in a Louisiana tidal basin—dubbed 'the Bathtub'—with a rowdy, multiracial group of misfits and a sickly, alcoholic father named Wink (Dwight Henry) who swings between harshly

neglecting and aggressively mentoring his daughter. Vulnerable to floods and storm-surge waters, the Bathtub is separated from the mainland or “dry side” by a levee. On the dry side sits a blurry factory, industry, consumerism, and a filthy haze. It may be ‘rich’ and ‘safe’ but it is spiritually desiccated.

Life in the Bathtub is bare and broken but it is also *full*. Full of booze, junk, bacchanal, decay, fireworks, grief, experience, knowledge, extremes of catastrophe and drunken rapture. People and animals roam freely, untethered to wealth or materialism. Life may tilt towards tragedy in the Bathtub but it is juiced with uncommon liberty and moments of pure communal joy. If this is the frontline of climate change, then *carpe diem*. A festive fireworks celebration during the opening sequence captures something of the film’s ‘precarity be damned’ ethos.

Faced with brewing storms and floods, The Bathtub locals are determined to hang on and protect their autonomy and collective way of life. It is better to be wet and alive in their view than to live in a “dry world”—better to experience self-sufficient squalor than soulless state-dependency; better to stay in place than endure the violence of resettlement.

Beasts of the Southern Wild (2012) is one of the most influential and most discussed ‘climate change’ films in recent American history. On the fifth anniversary of its release, I excavate scholarly and popular debates about the film to probe the film’s virtues and blindspots: Is *Beasts* a means to symbolize “climate resistance” (Nicholas Mirzoeff) or a naturalizing of slow violence and the poverty/precarity of Black lives (Christina Sharpe)? What might we learn from the disunity of response to this film?

My intent in this chapter is to explore how decisions about worth and care are connected to environmental sacrifice zones and the boundaries of publicly recognizable

childhood and to suggest the need to attend to the ongoing implications of colonial and racial history. Responding to Christina Sharpe’s call for “wake work,” I consider what care might look like in the face of a troubled and extant politics of care, built on a long history of anti-Blackness and white paternalism. However iterative and uncomfortable, I argue, we need care. Care stands against ‘neglect’ and socially and ecologically eroding acts of inattention.

A Beastly, All-But-Drowned World

There are many themes drifting through *Beasts of The Southern Wild*, several of which I will parse shortly, but the central one is a celebration of resilience and independence in the face of durational loss or “slow violence.” The film offers a booming tribute to the tenacity of the Bathtub’s multiracial outliers, who go to extreme lengths to defend their homes and their magical if improbable community in the wake of climactic disaster. (The improbability of this community will be a recurring motif in criticism of the film, as I will soon discuss.)

In this all-but-drowned place, there is no character more emblematic of this gritty survivalist spirit than Hushpuppy. Ever capable, Hushpuppy cooks (catfood) and cares for herself and a posse of domestic animals. Ever resourceful, she lives bare and in the near open without even proper attire to protect her from the elements. Her very features, from her wild hair to her fierce scowl to her honed stare, appear sculpted by years of sparring and inclement weather. Her big six-year-old eyes seem to have already absorbed it all—scenes of slow catastrophe and unexpected tenderness. The film’s power derives in large part from its faithfulness to Hushpuppy’s feisty and elegiac perspective. She is

the only focal point of a disintegrating world. The camera floats and tilts in her direction, capturing the ruined textures and tones of her tenuous surroundings. She is the story's motor and momentum. She is the community's storyteller, recording their history for the benefit of 'the scientists of the future.' Her freeform delivery, fanciful, laced with wonder and ecological anxiety, narrates what it means to love a wounded place with all your wounded heart; and, by extension, what it means to be fervently attached to *all fragile places* (be it a post-Katrina bayou, a grief-stricken community or the planet itself.) Through her empathetic eyes we are connected to the weave of the universe, from visions of particles flying through the air, to melting ice caps to Arctic avalanches to prehistoric creatures.

The viewer's proximity to Hushpuppy's inner life is deeply stirring but also, as some critics and scholars have argued, gravely unsettling. The film taps into a series of concerns about what it takes to 'survive' in a time of growing instability and climate change. What does care look like in an unequal and warming world? Hushpuppy is obviously tough, willing to soldier on, but there is no mistaking her vulnerable existence. Her small trailer is filled with memorabilia and memories of a mother, who "swam away" when she was a baby. She shares land and provisions with her father, Wink, whose idea of parental care is to toughen his daughter up—call it imparting "survival skills." Having contracted a mysterious illness, he prepares his daughter for the coming storm; and presumably for a time when he will no longer be there to protect her. As Natalia Cecire writes, "The film poses a nearly unthinkable, yet all too present, question: how does one prepare a small child for a future marked by imminent environmental collapse?" (2015, 164)

Indeed, *Beasts* defies the accepted and privileged mantra that preparing children for climate change means safeguarding them from fear until they are old enough to handle it. Make no mistake: we are not in the realm of David Sobel with his maxim “no (environmental) tragedies until fourth grade” (1996).⁹⁵ No one in the Bathtub seems at all concerned with ‘age-appropriateness’ or ‘developmental parameters.’

Under Wink’s often-cruel tutelage, Hushpuppy learns to trawl the bayou for fish and “beast” a crab and to generally fend for herself. But in the absence of loving care and protection, Hushpuppy clings to a basketball jersey and calls out for her mother when things go wrong, conveying the ache of a young child longing for true tenderness—a child who has repeatedly been told there is “no time for crying.”⁹⁶

Her load is enormous. She feels culpable for her father’s ailing health but also for the world’s woes and fragility. She carries all of this inside her small frame. There is a frightening moment when she punches her father right in the heart. The sound of his heartbeat gives way to the sound of thunder and then the loud concussive crack of glacial ice. The floods have come. As Wink collapses, we see images of melting ice caps and calving glaciers. “Mama!” Hushpuppy calls out in her voice-over: “I think I broke something!”

In tandem with her father’s illness, we discover that Hushpuppy believes she has caused nature, itself, to fly out of joint. This is not self-aggrandizement or a lack of discernment so much as intense self-blame borne of magical thinking. Like many

⁹⁵ While the maxim seems wildly insensitive to the climate realities of many young children, it contains the seed of an inviolable idea: children, no matter their circumstances, deserve a childhood. Ascribing agency to young children cannot eclipse the need for protection.

⁹⁶ Her wish for parental love culminates in a scene towards the end of the film when she is held by a woman she imagines to be her mother. “This is my favourite thing,” Hushpuppy says in voice-over. “I can count all the times I been lifted on two fingers.”

children, she takes the circumstances that befall her very personally. Through her child eyes and imagination, we witness the unleashing of a herd of aurochs—prehistoric beasts frozen in the glaciers but now free to rampage the warming earth as they emerge from the thawing ice of Antarctica. They are headed towards The Bathtub, ready to destroy the community. (Note: early in the film, Hushpuppy’s teacher, Miss Bathsheba, reveals a thigh tattooed with aurochs. Describing the melting ice caps and rising sea levels and predicting the aurochs’ de-extinction, Bathsheba warns: "any day the fabric of the universe is going to unravel."⁹⁷ In Hushpuppy’s mind these beasts come alive as a result of her individual actions, symbolizing both the turmoil of the coming storm and her father’s impending death.)⁹⁸ If one piece busts, even a small piece, the entire universe will be broken.

In the face of looming calamity, our small hero philosophizes like an old soul: “The whole universe depends on everything fitting together just right.” In other words, if her personal troubles and the plight of the larger world are connected, Hushpuppy reasons she can save her dad and make the universe “go right back” by mending the broken piece that made it “get busted” in the first place.

Throughout *Beasts*, we experience the burdens that have befallen Hushpuppy—from her father’s illness to her bayou’s destruction to the arrival of mystical creatures.

⁹⁷ School in The Bathtub is a one-room shack. Hushpuppy’s teacher Miss Bathsheba (Gina Montana) is equal parts sage and medicine woman who puts resilience right up there with the other Rs in terms of what kids need to know. She instructs her students on their place in the food chain: “Meat. Meat meat meat. Every animal is made out of meat. I’m meat. Your ass is meat. Everything is part of the buffet of the universe.” Her pedagogy is wild and hard knocks, summed up by her admonition: “y’all better learn how to survive.”

⁹⁸ Adding a layer of magical realism to the story, the recurring image of these ancient beasts is open to interpretation. The aurochs can be seen to fill the void of a missing mother, providing form to the catastrophe of paternal abandonment, gesturing towards Hushpuppy’s general inability to find sanctuary in an hospitable world. The aurochs might show Hushpuppy steeped in her efforts to tame the fearful and unthinkable circumstances of her life. As avatars of a submerged pre-human and prehistoric past and resurrected nature, the aurochs also symbolize recognition of the more-than-human world.

She is caught in impossible orbits of responsibility, fastened on the task of survival while the world around her unravels. One would expect her to crack under the mounting pressure but this does not happen because she has, by dint of pluck or trauma or both, mastered the stunt of self-possession. What she does so persuasively—guided in part by a reverential camera that lingers on her close and quietly—is suffuse the screen with nobility. It is a nobility that, for some, anoints her a resilient *universal* hero. It is a nobility that, for others, distracts from the obligation to attend to what *singularly* and *specifically* pains her.

Much has been made of the film's 'colorblind' or non-traditional casting. Notably, the script was adapted from "Juicy and Delicious," a play by Lucy Alibar about a ten-year-old white boy and his father in southern Georgia. With her directing partner Benh Zeitlin, Alibar changed the setting to a Louisiana bayou and the star of the film became a six-year-old Black girl. Given this transposition, a recurring question in criticism of the film relates to what the presence of a Black girl does to the original story and stories of climate struggle more generally. How does her presence inflect Alibar and Zeitlin's view of survivalism, self-reliance and cosmic caregiving?

Tavia Nyong'o has argued that "the positive reception of the casting of a little Black girl to represent the future of the (human) race" is hardly revolutionary when we consider that "collective survival in the face of climate change is routinely presented in the liberal imagination as uniting humanity across difference"(2015, 257). Nyong'o writes: "The colorblind casting of Quvenzhané Wallis as the film's protagonist insistently foregrounds the tension between the particular and the universal, the local and the global, that *Beasts* attempts to manage" (Nyong'o 251). It is a tension that remains unresolved

precisely because antagonisms pertaining to human differences (of race, gender, class or sexuality) cannot be subsumed by magical thinking or the wishful desire for “color-blind planetary solidarity in the face of climate change” (Nyong’o 265).⁹⁹

What complicates *Beasts* and accounts in part for its divided reception is precisely this universal/particular split: an embrace of individual pluck versus a concern for Black care. Thus, for some, the film is a galvanizing and enchanting story of posthuman climate resistance. While for others, it is a dangerously mythologizing story of all-too-human racial and economic inequality. For some, the film’s magical realism allows for an enchanting and ‘true-feeling’ evocation of the fever dream of climate collapse and dispossession.¹⁰⁰ While for others, these fantastical elements are seen to perniciously mystify the historical conditions of the characters’ lives.¹⁰¹

Beasts is many films. It is an ecological fairy tale and a rising seas story. It is a tale of a multiracial community and precarious freedom. It is a story of girlhood survival, and of what it means to come to terms with mortality, in the face of personal and planetary disasters.

But if the Bathtub is a proxy for a world in crisis or a prophecy of the future that awaits all of us, the film is also a treatise. It offers a discernible creed. It is the creed of abandoning oneself to the wildness of all things and all moments. It is the creed of ‘pride

⁹⁹ The presence of a Black female child on screen is not simply ‘additive’ (as the postracialist fantasy would proffer) but ‘transfigurative’ of the narrative. To quote Judith Butler: “It is not a matter of a simple entry of the excluded into an established ontology, but an insurrection at the level of ontology, a critical opening up of the questions, What is real? Whose lives are real? How might reality be remade?” (Butler 2004, p. 33)

¹⁰⁰ According to director Benh Zeitlin (quoted in Arons 2012): *Beasts* is “about the emotional facts. What is the feeling of going through this loss of a place or of a parent or of a culture? How does that feel, and how do you respond emotionally to survive that?”

¹⁰¹ The competing and seemingly irreconcilable responses are tied to larger discursive framings and have much to do with how we understand the relationship between cinema and what stands outside of cinematic space; how does film negotiate history, experience, or ‘the real’ (which in this case includes the real disaster and public-policy tragedy of Hurricane Katrina)?

in poverty’ and ‘optimism from squalor.’¹⁰² It is the creed of fierce autonomy as the revered and necessary hallmark of alternative living.

In the world Zeitlin has created, survival is celebrated as a triumph but also as a conclusion. In the final scene, we see a long shot of Hushpuppy and the Bathtub’s survivors marching along the road as rising water laps at their feet. Hushpuppy, orphaned in the wake of Wink’s death, has been left to fend for herself. As viewers, we are left to wonder: is that it? What happens after? How will she live? By careening from trauma to trauma? By being prepared for anything? How will we all live in a world with diminishing and uneven protections? What vision of the future is on offer?¹⁰³

It is perhaps accurate and faithful to climate change’s ongoing and diffuse violence to leave the ending ambiguous. We are not, after all, looking for stories of false amelioration. But it is the tone of triumphalism (aided by a heroic soundtrack) that confuses. It is a tone that makes romance out of chronic survival. It is a tone of utopianism—fragile but persistent—that turns inner strength into a panacea and that champions the role of anarchic collectives in providing self-help for the marginalized and socially discarded.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² For Lauren Berlant, “cruel optimism” is a relational situation wherein individuals are attached to “compromised conditions of possibility” that actually obstruct the conditions for flourishing and fulfilling such promises (2011: 24,23). I would argue that the version of survival promoted in the film comes more and more to resemble self-entrapment, or “cruel optimism.” The cruelty lies in the outcome: persistent poverty and vulnerability.

¹⁰³ If the “history of sentimentality around children that sees them as the reason to have optimism” is tied in part to the notion that “their lives are not already ruined” what does this say about the child living in ruins? How does ethical, political and aesthetic hope get attached to the child whose future is delimited by “a blighted field of possibility” or a narrative that cannot be organized around the promise or hope for a better life and story (Berlant 2011, 171)?

¹⁰⁴ Addressing the difficulty inherent to celebratory narratives of the oppressed, Saidiya Hartman notes that they bleed into the idea that there is “a space you could carve out of the terrorizing state apparatus in order to exist outside its clutches and forge some autonomy” (2003, 186).

In this pages that follow, I wade further into the various iterations of care and un-care offered in the film. I propose that ideas of resilience need to be responsive to longstanding histories of structural violence and neglect. Expectations of grit and tenacity without a functional infrastructure of care (however incomplete and impossible) risk perpetuating abandonment and injustice.

What is Black girlhood worth? Who has the right to protection? The problems that ultimately haunt the film, I suggest, are deeply connected to care dynamics and care gaps, which are tied, in this instance, to a disavowal of Blackness and Black childhood. What *Beasts* captures are the limits of utopian projects that glorify the individual over the social and the mythic over the historical. It is, after all, only within a utopian or ‘magical’ framework that Hushpuppy’s much-vaunted resilience can be celebrated as a triumph rather than a tragedy. Absent the scaffolding of fantasy, I argue, and the film presents a figuration of utopia that cannot offer or sustain Black care.

To illuminate this impasse, I turn to Christina Sharpe’s concept of “wake work,” articulated most forcefully in her book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016). For Sharpe, care involves attending to the needs of the dying but also the needs of the non-assimilable living. Responding to a call by Saidiya Hartman to take up ‘matters of care’ as an antidote to violence, Sharpe asks us to consider what care might look like in the face of a troubled and extant politics of care, built on a long history of Black trauma, white paternalism and forced assimilation (towards human and non-human others). Care, in Sharpe’s generative argument, emerges from the hope of yielding something more—more than survival, more than cruel optimism. Our (posthuman) future imaginings require that we take seriously the call for care and the mattering of Black lives while

interrogating the power relations and affective formations that course through care work. As Tavia Nyong'o argues, "The filmmakers' dream of a rewilded, ecological cinema is indeed alluring, but achieving it by tapping into the primitive vitality of a native terrain and its mongrel denizens fails to answer the challenge that Black and Indigenous studies pose to the posthuman" (2015, 266).¹⁰⁵ In later sections of this chapter I elaborate upon the challenges (erasures and exclusions) that confront critical posthumanist thinking.

But first, I revisit the film's critical battlelines to get to the heart of its divided reception and to explore larger rifts within climate justice discourses and movements. Five years after its release, *Beasts* continues to offer its viewers provocative ways of thinking through the present-day world in the context of climate change, neoliberalism, and racialized violence.

A Blast of Anarchic Joy

It is the first image I remember when someone mentions the film. Every time I watch the film again, it stays with me. A quietly epic moment, Hushpuppy gripping a paper bag containing fried alligator for her dying father, facing down a herd of aurochs. A terrestrial and psychic standoff: she is ready to confront her beasts. It is hard not to be besotted with Quevenzhane Wallis in the lead role.

The film blasts moviegoers with a kaleidoscope of dream-like images—some subtle, some thunderous. It is a feat of big billowing effects on a small budget. It is not surprising that *Beasts of the Southern Wild* entranced viewers during its initial theatrical

¹⁰⁵ There remains a wariness about scaling up from the human toward the global, the planetary, the environment or the 'Anthropocene' for the simple reason that the focus on the large scale makes the place of the human—and particularly some humans—less present.

run in the summer of 2012. The film generated buzz on the film festival circuit, winning the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance and the Camera d'Or for best directorial debut at Cannes, on its way to Oscar nominations for Best Picture, Best Director (Benh Zeitlin), Best Actress (Quvenzhané Wallis) and Best Adapted Screenplay (Benh Zeitlin and Lucy Alibar).

Prominent movie critics delivered rapturous reviews, emphasizing the film's tone of warm survivalism, freedom and American-style independence. For David Denby of *The New Yorker*, *Beasts* was "a joyous movie," "thrillingly loose-limbed and savagely happy." A.O. Scott of *The New York Times* called it "a blast of sheer, improbable joy" and placed *Hushpuppy* in a tradition of independent American child heroes that included Huck Finn and Scout Finch.

The theme of hard work and resourcefulness quickly attached to the making of the film itself. This was the little film that could. Shot on 16 mm with hand-held cameras, made for a meagre \$1.8 million with a cast of non-actors who had 'never acted a day in their lives' and produced by a grassroots collective at the helm, *Beasts* was named a "game-changer" (*Rolling Stone*) and a "small miracle of deliberate outsider art" (*Smithsonian Magazine*). Zeitlin's anarchic flouting of the Hollywood studio system was seen to mirror the spirit of the Bathtub. If Hollywood represented the super-rich "dry side," Zeitlin's filmmaking collective Court 13 stood in for the rabble-rousing poor.¹⁰⁶

Solidifying the film's status as an ode to American resourcefulness, First Lady Michelle Obama honored the film with a special Black History Month screening in

¹⁰⁶ The film was produced by Court 13, a New Orleans-based "crew of friends—filmmakers, artists, craftspeople, and builiders" with the goal of making "a new kind of movie, one crafted from collaboration." Court 13's online statement further expresses its commitment to "art and filmmaking rooted in unique collaborations, social inclusion, recycling materials, and education." See: <http://court13arts.org/about/>

February 2013. Eighty middle- and high school students from Washington, New Orleans and Los Angeles were invited to the White House to participate in an interactive workshop with the film's cast and crew. Speaking before the primarily African American youth audience, Obama described the movie as “beautiful, joyful and devastatingly honest” and urged the students to take heed of the film's message of individual responsibility and determination in the face of all odds.

It's a movie that...shows us the strength of our communities, no matter what they look like. It shows us that those communities can give us the power to overcome any kind of obstacles...

Like the characters in this movie, we know that our families and our communities gave us the love and support to go out and pursue our dreams. But like Benh and Dwight and Quvenzhané, what I want you all to understand is that you have to do the work. That's my message: You have to do the work. We're not here because we didn't do the work. We all did the work.

You all have to really be focused on preparing yourselves for the challenges and the opportunities that will lie ahead for all of you. You've got to be prepared (Obama 2013).

The romance of bootstrapping agency was not the only attraction. For other critics and scholars, the film's most innovative contribution was to telescope beyond the ‘American survival story’ to offer a larger eco-social parable. Viewed in curative terms, the film was seen to provide a space for reckoning with difficult ‘real-world’ events—namely Hurricane Katrina, particularly as experienced by the Lower Ninth Ward, the poorest and lowest lying topography of New Orleans. Writing for *The Guardian*, Peter Bradshaw commended the film as “a vividly poetic and maybe even therapeutic response to one of the most painful and mortifying episodes in modern American history, second only to 9/11” (2012). Amy Taubin of *Artforum*, meanwhile, suggested the film offered valuable counsel about recovery: “One might say that Hushpuppy's journey involves her coming

to terms with death and learning that what has been lost can be reclaimed as memory” (2012).

Beasts was additionally heralded as a galvanizing climate change film and a rewilded alternative to more dystopian cli-fi.¹⁰⁷ The film is full of moments when flora and fauna (creatures and waterways, dirt and sheer earthiness) urge us to question human exceptionalism; to reconsider the very idea of “the human and the tenets of development, progress, and mastery over nature that hold it in place” (Barnsley 2016, 240). Capturing the film’s merging of human figure with non-human ground, Roger Ebert referred to the Bathtub residents as living “so close to the earth that it might as well be part of them” (2012).

At a time when many of us have become inured to the standard environmental-apocalyptic scenario, the slow diminishments, the steady reductions, the background din of life forms slowly slipping into oblivion, *Beasts* is notable in its willingness to imagine species extinction and consider nonhuman environmental agency. Hushpuppy’s fairy tale imagination is cosmological in scope and allows for an experimental aesthetic that encompasses vast time scales. Like many children, Hushpuppy is also an intuitive animist who sees the world as vibrant and alive and herself as embedded in a universe buzzing and beating with other creatures. As visual theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff describes it:

Piles of crustaceans fill the screen, or thickets of dense vegetation, or masses of melting glacial ice. Even the air is thick with dust motes, glinting in the sun, or insect life. The crisp, empty space of the modern cinema is here overflowing with what Jane Bennett calls “vibrant matter.” It’s wild, unbounded and undomesticated (2012).

¹⁰⁷ See, most recently: Hoad, P. Spoiler alerts: the five best climate-change films in *The Guardian*, 19 January 2017
<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/jan/18/best-top-climate-change-films>

By placing humans in a much larger frame, Zeitlin positions the Bathtubbers as enmeshed in interdependent webs of life and geological history.¹⁰⁸ The aurochs that lift the film out of the human-centric and local call forth Robert Macfarlane's idea of 'deep time' (see my introductory chapter). Hushpuppy's affinity with the animals that surround and accompany her is a reminder to protect the vulnerable and voiceless.¹⁰⁹ It is an ethos encapsulated by Miss Bathsheba when she tells her students: "This is most important thing I can ever teach y'all. You got to take care of people that's smaller and sweeter than you are."

Beasts' great contribution according to Nicholas Mirzoeff and Alexa Weik von Mossner is its attempt to visualize the otherwise hard-to-visualize "slow violence" of climate change. "In the film," Weik von Mossner writes, "this slow and long-distance mode of violence is embodied in the imposing levee that clearly marks the outer boundaries of the Bathtub, boundaries that are both geographical and socio-economic in nature" (2014, 66). By using a cinematic language that celebrates the feral and the autonomous (against the mainland's profit-driven order), Mirzoeff concludes that the film opens a space to imagine climate resistance and "a re-wilding of social space" (2012).

But what is the nature of this climate resistance? What forms of social organization are being modeled here? The film certainly offers a dauntless view of how people fare in moments of civilizational and infrastructural collapse. It promotes the

¹⁰⁸ This shifting between different scales (between the granular lives of humans and the grand scope of the cosmos) has become a theme and motif in recent artistic/film practice. As Dipesh Chakrabarty states in *Artforum*: "the whole question of scale was much less present in the discussion in the '80s and '90s" (2016). Chakrabarty refers to this as the challenge of making the "incommensurable commensurate" and of bringing planetary events into "the realm of the experiential."

¹⁰⁹ Natalia Cecire grants that the film's "posthumanist strain" which aims to demolish categories of "race, gender, age, and indeed, the human" is not "an outlandish strategy for environmental thinking, which, as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) among others has argued, demands a decentering of the human in favor of other and bigger time scales" (2015, 177).

laudable idea that it's possible to be human in other, less materialistic ways. It is an idea that at first glance merges the anarcho-spirit and “dark ecology” of Paul Kingsnorth with the shambling communal goodwill and ragtag benevolence Rebecca Solnit enshrines in her book *A Paradise Built in Hell*.¹¹⁰ But is that sufficient?

While commemorating the solidarity and “resilient resourcefulness” that arises in the wake of Katrina-like disasters, Solnit makes it clear she does not see community spirit or self-reliance as a replacement for a functional or caring welfare state. She avoids libertarian optimism, noting that a disaster utopia is “by its very nature unsustainable and evanescent... like a lightning flash it illuminates ordinary life, and like lightning it sometimes shatters the old forms” (2009, 17).

Beasts, by contrast, seems to promote disaster utopianism as an endpoint and that is where the film’s politics grow murky. In its celebration of self-sufficiency, *New York Times* film critic A.O. Scott proposes the film offers an appealing non-partisan blueprint for navigating survival in the face of disaster. As he puts it: “From the left, you can embrace a vision of multicultural community bound by indifference to the pursuit of wealth and an ethic of solidarity and inclusion. From the right, you can admire the libertarian virtues of a band of local heroes who hold fast to their traditions and who flourish in defiance of the meddling good intentions of big government” (2012).

But is it truly bipartisan or is the dream of being ‘left alone’ perhaps more problematic—more neoliberal and more in keeping with capitalism’s ideals of individual responsibility, as Cedric Johnson has deemed? In Johnson’s view, the film’s “cynical politics” erodes its “cinematic virtues” (2013). He writes:

¹¹⁰ See: Kingsnorth, P. (2012). Dark Ecology. In *Orion Magazine*. 21 December. Retrieved from: <https://orionmagazine.org/article/dark-ecology/>

The film celebrates autonomy and wild freedom but democratic government beyond the primitive village form is demonized. . . Benevolent elements of the state, such as the national guard, flood control systems, and the disaster shelter which serve as a critical life line in real disasters, are all depicted in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* as impersonal and corrupt, the enemies of the wild freedom that the Bathtub's residents enjoy (2013, 211-212).

The romanticization of outsidership and the vilification of external care rankle. It's an idealistic view of civilizational collapse that celebrates holdouts and opting out. (Thus, the problem for the Bathtub residents is not the failure of the functioning levees but the soulless urban world that exists behind them.)

The fantasy on offer is one where "people with no money nonetheless seem rich with friendship, camaraderie, and the wealth of the natural world in which they live in utter balance" (Dolan 2012). But it is also a fantasy (a "republican fantasy" in the words of *Time Out* critic Ben Kenigsberg) about the end of governmentality where all forms of state care, protection and intervention are cast in a malevolent Foucaultian light, where grim symbols of menace (the levee, the internment camp, the police, the helicopter) become metonyms for government. The fantasy's apotheosis occurs when officials issue an emergency evacuation of the Bathtub and Hushpuppy and her community are placed in an antiseptic hospital where health care workers are depicted as prison wardens (Hartnell 2015 942-943.) Their escape ("We're bustin' out of here!") is seen as a victory: all they want is to take care of their own. FEMA be damned.¹¹¹

It is a fantasy, finally, of celebratory wildness that, in Jayna Brown's words, reinscribes "primitivist ideas of black and brown peoples as atavistic, noble savages

¹¹¹ FEMA = Federal Emergency Management Agency. It is one thing to critique the paternalism of state care and ask hard questions about the nature of social work as it has related to Black poor people, it is quite another to cast all public care officials as villainous and to infer that the poor just want to be left to their own devices.

outside of civilization” who know “the rituals with which to guide us all back to a pre-apocalyptic era” (2013b, 125).

What we learn from these responses to *Beasts* is something about the film’s internal contradictions. We learn that it is possible to offer a more humble view of the human in the world and still reify notions of the “heroic” human. It is possible to create an optimistic film (embodying a #wegotthis ethos of grit and mutual aid) that is ultimately cynical and reliant on savagist stereotypes. And, finally, it is possible to narrate a story of rebellion that effectively supports a neoliberalist status quo.¹¹²

In the next section, I will elaborate on *Beasts*’ broader social resonances, testing the film’s experimental vision against its conservative mode of storytelling.

Romancing Precarity

Hushpuppy lives on scraps and tough tenderness in a state of extreme poverty and difficulty. Her plight is immense. Her child’s point of view, precocious. In the face of a bitter reality, she creates a fantasy world to protect herself. It is a story about the oneness and interconnection of all living beings—past, present and future. Through fantasy, she places a patina on her precarious circumstances and on the filth and destruction that surrounds her. The fantasy beckons, offering succour to the viewer as well. In its thrall, it is possible to forget that this is a film about an unaccompanied and abused six-year-old. The film’s feats of enchantment impress and mesmerize. Only through the embellishments of a six-year-old’s imagination and the spin of a director’s euphoric

¹¹² Needless to say, the challenge of slowing climate change cannot be met by retreating to smaller and smaller communities or by rejecting government in favour of self-organization. We need improved government—including greater protections and public infrastructure—not less.

utopianism could a place like the Bathtub be declared the "prettiest place on earth."¹¹³

Only within a magical realist mode could questions of precarity and racism be so heavily abstracted.

For Black critics bell hooks, Tavia Nyong'o, Jayna Brown, and Christina Sharpe, the fantasy fails. The film's narrative difficulties cannot be erased by its noble intentions or good looks, or by its heroic score or flights of magical realism.

"It is a major mystery that moviegoers adore this film and find it deeply moving and entertaining," writes hooks (2012). "How does a little black girl orphaned and abandoned become a vision for climate resistance?" wonders Sharpe, offering that the film "needs black bodies because how else could incipient sexual and other violence . . . be inspiring and not tragic?" (2013) Brown hones in on Hushpuppy's role as a Black redeemer figure and cosmic medium—pointing to the irony and outrage that "those beings excluded from privilege and not recognized as 'human,' hold alien power as ethical compasses" (2013b, 123). Nyong'o echoes this thought, asking how it is that a Black female child is "asked to perform the work of imagining the survival of a civilization that has abandoned her? What is the relationship between her singular race, gender, and infancy and the ostensibly universal narrative she embodies? And why is her narrative of wondrous survival framed through such standard tropes as Black familial dysfunction, paternal violence, and licentious femininity?" (2015, 251)

¹¹³ Defending his vision of the Bathtub in an interview with *The Atlantic*, director Benh Zeitlin refutes the idea that he is glorifying extreme poverty: "I see why people have that reaction, but for me, the Bathtub is an invention, it's not a real place. . . it's a society where all the things that divide people have been removed. So there's no religion, no politics, no money, no one sees race, there's no rich and poor because there is no currency. [It's] this utopian place. And the poverty thing, to me it's much more like it's been cut off from the world, and it's a survivalist place where they have to build everything by hand, they have to live off the earth. You don't have any commodities to sustain yourself, but to me there's no poverty there. There's this ultimate freedom that exists there" (Butman 2012).

For these scholars, the thrust of the narrative is appalling. Awe slips into awfulness. Hushpuppy, is essentially asked, ‘who’s going to save your life,’ and then told ‘You are.’ This may be true for Hushpuppy and other children living in states of peril—in the absence of adult authority and “healthy parenting” (hooks 2012)—but it’s a narrative of *profound failure* and needs to be addressed as such and not romanticized as what Christina Sharpe would call a “narrative of individual resilience and overcoming” (2014). As Sharpe tells us, “at least part of the disaster on view here is everyday Black life lived in the wake of slavery and neither this film nor many of its viewers actually account for that life as disastrous” (2013).

There is no apology or explanation for the lack of general upkeep, for the fact that Hushpuppy scampers around in underwear for much of the film or sleeps alongside barnyard animals. There is no explanation for the absence of any real regimen or familiar structure of care. Again and again, Hushpuppy rallies. Ever resourceful and resolute. Always a fighter. For some this is evidence of her incontestable strength, but for the film’s detractors it is grounds for lament. Hushpuppy (admired by Roger Ebert as “fierce and unbreakable”) should be respected for her determination but does she not also deserve a glut of love? Don’t all children deserve something softer and altogether steadier?

While I don’t believe that admirers of the film were unfazed by Hushpuppy’s circumstances, I do believe the question needs to be asked: how could it be that *Beasts* raised so few objections from most (white) critics?¹¹⁴ Sharpe and hooks argue that the film’s reception cannot be separated from a quotidian and symptomatic disregard for the

¹¹⁴ There is an argument to be made that the depiction of preternatural Black strength taps into the collective unconscious of white liberal audiences looking for escapes from the troubled politics of racial violence; that the fantasy of a Black child’s fortitude is a salve for white/parental guilt.

welfare of Black children. Blackness and the notion of Black invulnerability are not incidental to the narrative unfolding but constitutive of it. The scrupulous expectations of care our culture extends to white children slacken around a Black child. Intentionally, fearfully, ignorantly, murderously—Black children are placed in situations of extreme un-care, which allows for their “wholesale abandonment” as they are left “to their own devices” (Sharpe 2014, 65).¹¹⁵

Together these Black critics express a refusal. Interpreting the absence of care as an extension of violence, they refuse to accept the film’s tropes of self-reliance and rugged individualism. They refuse the expectation foisted on Black children (and adults) to valiantly persist. They refuse the heroic narratives that Western humanism holds sacrosanct. But, above all, they refuse the normalization of Black pain.

Indeed, underlying many of the film’s critiques is a concern for how easily Black suffering is disavowed and how vital it is to consider the genealogy and structural nature of this disavowal. As Robin Bernstein has detailed in *Racial Innocence*, the construction of the Black child as impervious to harm, and therefore excluded from innocence’s claims to protection, has a long and insidious history whose legacy includes the racialized “school-to-prison pipeline” and the criminalization of Black youth. “Images of nonsuffering black pickanninies emptied black childhood of innocence,” Bernstein writes (2011, 63). Insensateness and the alleged absence of pain meant that a Black child “did not call for protection” (65) and could be defined “out of childhood itself”

¹¹⁵ Think of Connor Moore, 4, and Brandon Moore, 2—young brothers who died when they were denied refuge during Hurricane Sandy. See: http://www.silive.com/news/index.ssf/2012/11/funeral_for_2_staten_island_br.html Or think of the unchilding of Black children who are, in Michelle Alexander’s words, “tried as adults and carted off to adult prisons” (2010, 222).

(42).¹¹⁶ Nazera Sadiq Wright’s further illuminates how Black girls have been expected to possess wisdom and endurance beyond their years. In *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century*, Wright creates an archive of “brave, bold, black girls who battled injustices—when adults in their lives were unwilling to” (2016).

To disavow Black pain is to propose that children (such as Hushpuppy) do not need any protection, as the film suggests, and that neither does the Bathtub, even though its destruction by environmental catastrophe is the fulcrum of the film. To disavow is to also repress the real-world events that form the film’s shadow text. While *Beasts* makes no claim to social realism, the Bathtub is modeled on a real place, Isle de Jean Charles (in south Louisiana), and the storm has an explicit analogue in Katrina. How is the audience to understand the connection between the mythic setting of *Beasts* and its correlating Louisiana bayou? What are the stakes and possibilities of re-imagining those events through the lens of magical realism?

Sacrifice Zones

One of the most compelling appraisals of the film comes from Patricia Yaeger who lauds *Beasts* for its mythic reimagining of life in the ‘Anthropocene’ where every particle of air has been altered and there is nothing pristine left to love— only ruined earth, water, and sky, extended in each direction. In Yaeger’s view, the film upends the assumption that

¹¹⁶ What Robin Bernstein refers to as “racial innocence” allows us to expose the injuries done to Black childhood. In *Racial Innocence*, Bernstein dates the division of childhood as a cultural formation into distinct white and black lineages to the second half of the nineteenth century: “White children became constructed as tender angels while black children were libeled as unfeeling, noninnocent nonchildren” (2011, 33). Compare this to Amy Biancolli’s description of Hushpuppy in *SFGate*: “the ferociousness of her presence—the anger and wisdom inside her— suggest someone older or ageless” (2012). Finally, to fully appreciate the consequences of this crisis of protection, please read the report: *Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced and Underprotected* (Crenshaw et al., 2015).

beauty is the only criteria for protection and that savaged landscapes are, therefore, disposable. It breaks down binaries of lovability and unlovability, guilt and innocence, by showing that embracing waste is a way of taking responsibility for human actions rather than merely renouncing them. Implicit here is the notion that a sacrifice zone can only be sacrificed if we see it as expendable, lost, undefendable. This is an echo of Slavoj Žižek's idea that a true political ecology can only be manifest when we feel 'at home in the dump'.¹¹⁷

Yaeger writes, "Images of acetylene torches, gas stoves, and gas engines remind us that although the film's characters are battered by the forces of global warming and their carbon footprint is small, creating a carbon-free democracy is not their concern. The citizens of the Bathtub practice a dirty ecology, making do with what they can salvage from other waste-making classes" (2013). For Yaeger it is a paradoxical community, on the one hand railing against an ugly oil refinery, on the other hand intricately tied up with the contradictions of First World living as a whole. The film suggests there can be no prelapsarian idyll because the "wasteland is with us now and forever." While recognizing that the film "carries the nation's baggage," Yaeger concludes that it surmounts its racial oversights by creating "a zone of history-making for Katrina's disposable bodies" and by providing "a steady critique of white capital." She refutes critics and "the realism of social critique" as "off the mark" because the film is "not a slice of life or a realist screed; its business is mythological: it proffers a sacred narrative with overtones of awe and cosmic investigation" (2013). In other words, Yaeger refuses the refusal of critics.

¹¹⁷ See: *Examined Life* (dir. Astra Taylor) 2008. Erica Violet Lee summons a more elegant version of this idea in an essay titled "In Defence of the Wastelands: A Survival Guide": "When we make a home in lands and bodies considered wastelands, we attest that these places are worthy of healing and that we are worthy of life beyond survival" (2016).

Of course, Yaeger's claim that *Beasts*' "mythic register" grants the film narrative immunity has not gone unchallenged. "I disagree with Yaeger here," writes Christopher Lloyd, "for surely, even if the film's vision is mythological, its regional context and social implications are integral to *Beast*'s message"(2016, 256). Agnes Woolley further argues that the film's mythmaking is the very precondition for discounting "the deep-rooted racial and social stratifications revealed by the events of 2005" (2012). She writes: "it's precisely through this image of Gaia-like transcendental ecological interdependence that the film evades the questions of gender, race and social relations that would undermine its vision of mythic unity" (2012).

A reminder: Katrina exposed a dominant culture suffused not only by "active malice" toward poor Black communities but also by a long history of "passive indifference" to their circumstances (Dyson 2006, 21). Katrina (downgraded to a "tropical storm" by the time it hit New Orleans) should never have breached the city's flood defense. It did so because the levees meant to protect the city had, despite repeat warnings about the risk by the Army Corps of Engineers, fallen into a state of ruin. They simply could not hold. "That failure was the result of two main factors," writes Naomi Klein. "One was a specific disregard for the lives of poor Black people, whose homes in the Lower Ninth Ward were left most vulnerable by the failure to fix the levees. This was part of a wider neglect of public infrastructure across the United States, which is the direct result of decades of neoliberal policy" (2017, 152-153). The dead and injured (predominantly Black) were plainly abandoned in the storm's wake: "Seen as throwaway, the South's largely black inhabitants were revealed, by Katrina and its aftermath, to be as discardable as in the region's past (Lloyd 2016, 246).

This is the shadow history the film indexes.

Thus, from the perspective of its detractors, the film's "predicament of witnessing" (Hartman 1997, 19) arises from two primary factors: 1) by privileging the mythic realm over the historical (rather than placing the two in dialectical relation), *Beasts* establishes its own sacrificial logic wherein the symbolic child is "saved" and the corporeal child is "damned." 2) While conceptualizing the slow violence of climate change, the film does not account for, indeed submerges, the intersecting slow violence of racism at its core.

What this panoply of criticism reveals is the need to better understand the consonance between stories of Black invulnerability and stories of sacrifice zones. They are linked by ideas of imperviousness, expendability, inevitability, and by a system of racial capitalism that profits off of sacrificial places and sacrificial people. And they are often bound by concurrent breakdowns (of social and environmental health) and by a "commonplace callousness" (Hartman 1997, 19).¹¹⁸

There is a need to better understand the intertwined "genealogical and scalar" nature of racism and climate change (Thompson 2017, 93). As Kara Thompson writes: both "belong to the procession of anthropogenic histories premised on white supremacy over black and brown bodies and nonhuman worlds, *and* on making these two at times indistinguishable" (2017, 93).¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ While exceeding the scope of this chapter, more attention needs to be paid to the way image-narratives have served to sacralize some children and spaces as priceless and worthy of care and protection while rendering other children and spaces (namely Indigenous and Black children in 'ruined' settings) as sacrificeable.

¹¹⁹ Resisting the disavowal of Black suffering is a key to climate justice. "7 out of 10 of the most vulnerable countries in the world are in Africa and this is the scandal of ecological theory and activism that chooses to remain silent about race." See: <https://www.afdb.org/en/cop22/focus-africa/implications-for-africa/>

The distributed nature of racism's slow violence has certain, incommensurable parallels to climate change. Both are produced across generations and involve a "slow leaking... across territories and over epochs" (Nixon 2015, 289). Both may erupt into "explosive and spectacular" visibility but may also take the form of "an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2).

For Christina Sharpe, anti-Blackness *is* climate. She uses a metaphor of "the weather" to situate white supremacy and the unhealed racial trauma of transatlantic slavery and colonialism as an atmospheric condition that produces premature Black death and Black suffering as normative. She calls this atmosphere of aftermath the "wake" and writes: "To explicate Fanon, it is not the specifics of any one event or set of events that are endlessly repeatable and repeated, but the totality of the environments in which we struggle; the machines in which we live; what I am calling the weather" (Sharpe 2017).

Because anti-Blackness is excessive and "precursive" (Sharpe 2016), it cannot be periodized and must therefore be understood as a continuum. Because it is a "mundane and quotidian" terror (Hartman 1997, 4), it does not, in the minds of many, elicit outrage or provoke demands for remedy. Nor can it be amended through the frames of juridical or charitable solutions. Because it is chronic and continuous—like the water, like the air—it is possible for losses and sacrifices to accrete within its atmosphere and be viewed as 'regular life' or part of the 'Black normal'. It is the nature of slow violence to pose as normal, even natural, thus misshaping our view of what counts as violence.

If this is the ongoing context, a reality that began with Middle Passage and that is built on the ongoing desecration of Black lives, not to mention the destruction of non-human lives and geographical bodies, how do we begin to establish ways of caring and

forms of witnessing that are more sustaining and hopeful? How do we respond to slow violence and attend to pain that is otherwise normalized, waning from attention completely, brought to consciousness only in moments of eruption and catastrophic weather (or, apropos of this chapter, when someone sounds a critical alarm)?

For Sharpe, eruptions of spectacular anti-Black violence are as inexorable as weather events that an unjust culture releases upon itself.¹²⁰ Theorizing Black life and death in “the wake” requiring recognition “of the ways that we are constituted through and by vulnerability to overwhelming force, though not only known to ourselves and to each other by that force” (2016, 16). Seeing Black life through the lens of “wake work” involves entering a different timescape of emergency, one that can push back against lethal and quotidian inattention and potentially break the bind of chronic un-care that faces communities on the frontlines of climate change while also recognizing how the vulnerable live in and despite those overdeterminations.¹²¹ Just as wake work troubles mourning (asking “how does one mourn the interminable event?”), so too does wake work trouble the way we bear witness to ever-unfolding catastrophic events (Sharpe 2016, 19-20).

Extending Sharpe’s thinking, I propose that “wake work” needs to be central to climate work. If we are to recognize that the slow violence of climate change and anti-Blackness are not situational or aberrational but rather a mutually constitutive grammar

¹²⁰ The thousands of Africans (many of them climate refugees) who have died in the Mediterranean over the past several years demonstrate “with violent clarity the terms of black death and suffering which continue to underwrite the modern world and the European project in particular” (Woods and Saucier, 2015).

See also: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/29/700-migrants-feared-dead-mediterranean-says-un-refugees>

¹²¹ The wake proceeds from an image of the long afterlife of transatlantic slavery as a wake trailing behind a ship. As Sharpe writes (of the other meanings of “wake”): “Wakes are about processes; through them we think about the dead and about our relations to them; they are rituals through which to enact grief and memory... finally, wake also means being awake and, most importantly, consciousness” (2014, 60).

and the very logic that produces the continuum of Black life and existence in a warming world (even as insurgent Black social life consistently works to undermine that grammar and logic), then the very terms of climate care need to be rethought.¹²² As Sharpe asks: “How can we think (and rethink and rethink) care laterally, in the register of the intramural, in a different relation than that of the violence of the state?” (2016, 20)

Care in Beastly Weather

Of all the moments of care and un-care in *Beasts*, the one that stays with me most occurs during the storm scene. As rain pounds the tin roof of their house, pouring through every opening, Wink tugs inflatable floaties onto Hushpuppy’s skinny arms and yells, “Don’t you ever take these off cuz I’m your daddy – it’s my job to make sure you don’t die.” Windows break and makeshift metal shutters clang. Seeing the look of terror on Hushpuppy’s face, Wink goes outside to battle the sky with a shotgun.

The twisted care of a dying father who believes it his duty to prepare his daughter for an unsure future is grievously inadequate. Under better circumstances it might be laughably so but here it feels tragic and symptomatic of a larger failure of protection. This is all Hushpuppy has. The arm floaties won’t save her and she knows it. We all know it.

The terms of rescue are impossible. In this scene, I feel the planetary scale of the climate crisis at the micro scale of the bodies of the most vulnerable. I feel the grievous

¹²² The insistence on the mattering of Black lives and denaturalization of Black suffering ruptures the presumptions of a ‘race-free’ posthumanism (quintessentially expressed in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*) and the idea that climate solutions can emerge from any spurious sense of unity and self-organization. It is a rejection not of *government* but of the idea of being *governed* by stories that, in the words of Sylvia Wynter, ‘narratively condemn’ Black lives (1994, 70). To put it in more explicit terms: heat, drought, extreme weather events and other eruptions of climate change, impact people whose well-being and life chances are already conditioned (condemned?) by racial capitalism.

inadequacy of global disaster policies that tout the *art of resilience* and promote *risk adaptation* as solutions for frontline, impoverished communities of color hit by the impacts of climate change. I feel the plight of low-lying islanders asked to withstand the rush of floodwaters thereby freeing the world economy to continue with unabated emissions, without obstruction, because, after all, when vulnerable communities are asked “to be the source of resilience, this is what we’re asking of them: to work constantly toward the capacity to absorb shocks and changes so the rest of us don’t have to worry about those shocks and changes, and we can keep generating more of them” (Cox 2016, 13-14).

The steely resolve that builds slowly for Hushpuppy, weighing her spirit down, feels microcosmic too—a reminder that admirable fortitude has a terrible cost and that the socially vulnerable deserve more. How do we properly frame Hushpuppy’s experience of the storms bearing down on her? What does it mean for a community to ‘go it alone’ when a tragic situation is wrenched upon it? In this ragged time where the ecological fabric is pretty threadbare, can we begin to rethink care or make care a problem for thinking?

The work demanded here is to better understand what care means, how it flourishes and deepens, how it contracts and dominates, how it appears in the private realm but also in the common one. The challenges of care in a stratified world are manifold. For example, how can ‘protection’ be envisioned as a praxis that does not map vulnerable places and people in colonial and paternalistic terms? Is it possible to avoid repeating and thereby buttressing philanthropic or sociological narratives that figure the

vulnerable as piteous, powerless and/or pathological?¹²³ Can crisis care resist a trajectory of assimilation whereby those rescued from ‘less normative’ circumstances are forcibly integrated into situations thought to be more ‘normal’? Can care resonate differently, socially, civically, more laterally?

We know that the act of care, in the wrong hands, can be fraught.¹²⁴ There are clear limits to rescue care (as the film makes copiously clear). But as Katrina (and more recently, Harvey, Maria and Irma) must remind us, the question of care cannot be discarded even if it needs constant rethinking. Only the illusion of a race-free perspective could see government non-response and failing infrastructure, generally the rule rather than the exception in a world that discards Black lives, as a good thing. In the face of weather emergencies, interruptions of civic care and medical infrastructure, it is not the socially privileged who stand to suffer loss of health and loss of life but rather the vulnerable—those living *in the wake*, amid the storms of social-historical fate, those who enjoy no protections or fantasies of security.¹²⁵

The film’s anarchic logic—which imagines all external care as violent and impersonal— is not entirely without grounding. Disaster aid *is* an imposition. It may take the form of swarming rescue workers descending in the aftermath, offering invasive forms of charity. Or, more perilously, it may be an extension of state-sponsored

¹²³ Adeline Johns-Putra maintains that an environmental care ethics must ceaselessly question: “who does the caring and who is cared for? who gets to make these decisions; what models of human-to-human care are we invoking in the process (friendship, kinship, marriage, parenthood, and so on); and what are the gender dynamics of our models of care?” (2013, 129)

¹²⁴ As Naomi Klein writes: “In moments of crisis, strong men step into it with far too much ease, announcing themselves ready to protect the flock from all evil, asking only absolute power and blind obedience in return” (2017, 226).

¹²⁵ Social privilege is its own elaborate care system in our overtly survivalist world where economic, environmental and social crises are readily exploited and even cynically exacerbated by those who can afford to retreat. This *New Yorker* story by Evan Osnos about wealthy Domsday preppers who have invested in finding land on higher ground helps put this in perspective.
http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/30/doomsday-prep-for-the-super-rich?utm_content=buffer84896&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer

violence¹²⁶. But neglect is not the answer. Neglect, despite *Beasts* attempt to convince us otherwise, does not increase autonomy and self-determination so much as drastically reduce vital services and security. The solution to fraught care is not less care but better care.

In the context of Katrina and its myriad aftermaths, certainly the most troubling legacy still is the degree of vulnerability that continues, particularly among the 370,000 school-age children who were displaced immediately following the hurricane. For even now, twelve years later, those displaced by Katrina (160,000 of whom remained so for years) are still experiencing struggles with schooling, housing, family stability, peer relationships, health, well-being. The children who experienced the greatest degree of pre-disaster vulnerability face the greatest difficulty recovering. A 2015 study on Katrina's long-term impact on children concludes:

Katrina affected many different aspects of children's lives, across space and across time. Indeed, even after our seven years of study, it was clear that the disaster continued to unfold in the lives of many children and youth. Disasters devastate, disrupt... This is not something that can be repaired in a matter of months or even years in the most catastrophic events... some children may suffer their entire lives due to the tremendous losses caused by Katrina; this suffering could ultimately result in generational effects (Fothergill and Peek 2015, 205).

We face a challenge that is about changing norms and timelines of response. How can care be reconceived in light of these disquieting and accretive legacies that refuse to be quieted or swept away? Is it possible to elaborate an ethics of care that does not see state help as transformational but rather as a limited reform, often circumscribed by anti-Black formulations? Can we imagine revolutionary practices of care that “do not centre on

¹²⁶ It comes back to “the notion of focusing one’s appeal to the very state that has inflicted the injury” (Hartman 203, 197-8). It is, in Saidiya Hartman’s estimation, a “contradictory or impossible position” (198).

repair, but on initiating ‘an epistemological break with the hegemonic common sense of both civil society and the left’” (Dylan Rodriguez quoted in Martina 2015)? As Egbert

Alejandro Martina writes:

What Sylvia Wynter teaches us is that any such politics of care must begin with a critique of the Human, since the category ‘Human’ has been defined in contradistinction to Black life. An ethics of care that seek to repair civil society without taking into account “how the category of ‘human’ itself remains fundamentally unethical with respect to black people” only extends that originary violence against Black lives and allows it to be rewritten as ‘care’ (2015).

Black scholars (such as Saidiya Hartman, Sylvia Winter, Katherine McKittrick, Rinaldo Walcott) caution that the objective of our critique should not be an attempt to go “beyond” the human, or beyond ourselves, but, rather, to reappraise the terms through which the human and humanity are understood.¹²⁷ Hope, in this sense, does not arrive in the form of bringing Black people into representation in ‘positive ways.’ It is not about recognition or inclusion but rather the refusal of categories such as ‘innocence’ (as a means of assessing Black life) in order to imagine a more vigorous future freedom. Hope comes from envisioning Black life as always already enunciating new forms of humanity and yielding the possibility of new relational models. Hope is not a colorblind Bathtub. Hope is a horizon.

To care in the wake (of Katrina, slavery, humanism) then is a pledge to anticipate the future while recognizing the afterlives and residue of the past; even and especially

¹²⁷ For Katherine McKittrick, Wynter’s “working out and muddling through new humanism” is a way to “honour our collective human-environment perspectives—which must be understood alongside the predicament of our ecocidal and genocidal world which normalizes post-slave Liberal individualism and posits it as the only available mode of being human—while also, importantly, making clear that her insights, and thus a more ethical world view for us all, could only be engendered from the perspective of the ex-slave archipelago” (2013, 237).

when such specters unsettle the unanimity, certainty, and sense of universalized humanity upon which community is imagined.

To care, in a warmed and anti-Black world, is to question the foundation upon which care itself is narrated.

•••

Toward the end of *Beasts of the Southern Wild* we see sparks dancing in the air. Wink's dead body is floating in a car-raft downstream. Hushpuppy has set it alight according to Wink's final wishes. As Hushpuppy tells us: "When it all goes quiet behind my eyes, I see everything that made me lying around in invisible pieces." She is alone. Her world disassembled. There are no clues to the future that awaits her.

The hope is that viewers will keep thinking and feeling alongside her, keep hoping that the broken pieces will one day amount to more, that she will find the wakeful care she needs to do more than to merely survive, but to flourish.

CHAPTER FOUR

Living with the Weather in *Qapirangajuq: Inuit Knowledge and Climate Change*

“Our—Western, Euro—version of the hero is the person who follows his heart, sticks up for his own individuality, at all costs. The John Wayne figure, in Inuit culture, is socially irresponsible.” —Norman Cohn (co-founder with Zacharias Kunuk of Igloodik Isuma's collective)

*“Everything is strange. Things are huge and very small... We are giants, lying here, who can make forests quiver.” —Virginia Woolf, *The Waves**

THE FILM OPENS on a rugged coastline, with a view of birds flying overhead, a vast and clouded sky. We see an encampment of tents in the blue night. A dog sled traverses a frozen plain. A group of children fish from the rocks. This montage of northern scenes is accompanied by the voiceover of several Inuit elders.¹²⁸ The voices are here to tell us about the weather and about what it means to weather changes intimately. “By observing the sky, weather was predicted,” one man recalls, “cloud formations indicated wind direction. Now it is different. First they form one way, then they quickly change, telling you a different story.” Another elder recalls a recurrent scene from his childhood: “we were told to look outside. Once outside we observed the environment.” And another: “First thing in the morning I was told to go out in order to welcome the environment.”

Qapirangajuq: Inuit Knowledge and Climate Change (2010) is a one-hour film composed entirely of elder testimonies and scenes of Inuit life.¹²⁹ Hailed by critics internationally, it is the world’s first Inuktitut-language documentary on climate change

¹²⁸ The names of the elders are credited at the end of the film “in order of appearance.”

¹²⁹ *Qapirangajuq* means to “spear strangely.” It is the closest way of describing 'refraction' in Inuktitut. As co-director Ian Mauro notes: “Across Nunavut, elders indicated that the sun was out of position, making it appear as if ‘the world has tilted on its axis.’ By linking this traditional knowledge with science, we determined that climate change is increasing the frequency of mirages, which are altering the visual landscape of the Arctic and making celestial bodies appear differently in the sky. These mirages, caused by refraction, reminded Inuit of spear fishing and how hunters must adapt their technique to account for the visual distortion between the perceived and actual position of a fish in water” (Mauro 2014).

and was created by Nunavut-based director Zacharias Kunuk and climate scholar/filmmaker Ian Mauro to foreground the observations of elders and hunters living across Nunavut.¹³⁰ Ranging from accounts of increasingly temperate winters and thinning ice to sightings of strange new plants and sick animals, the voices plait a communal testimony. There are no intervening interviews with outside ‘experts.’ No ‘environmentalists’. No meteorologists. There is “just those voices and the steady Kunuk lens, which viewers will recognize from his films *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001) and *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* (2006)—a calm frame in which traditional knowledge survives amid modern pressures” (Taylor 2011). Anecdotal evidence is welcomed as a vital complement to the stories of Western science.

Perhaps *complement* is too tame a word. At certain moments in the film, tensions erupt between official climate change research and Inuit knowledge systems. The appropriateness of certain conservation strategies is thrown into question, for example, when hungry and hostile polar bears begin roaming through villages. Contrary to what the conservationists say, the elders interviewed in the film believe the polar-bear population is actually *increasing*. (“Scientists say with great authority, ‘Polar bears are in decline and will go extinct.’ When I am out hunting, I never see these scientists. Not even one!”) The elders argue that conservationists, who put radio collars around the bears’ necks that impede their ability to fish, are traumatizing the bears finding their way into

¹³⁰ The pair spent months in Nunavut communities filming interviews with Inuit. Note: *Inuktitut* is the main language in the high arctic.

Inuit communities. Noisy survey helicopters that disturb their quiet isolation are endangering the bears.¹³¹

At another point in the film, elders from four distinct communities (Pangnirtung, Iqaluit, Resolute Bay and Igloodik), share their view that the Earth has tilted on its axis. The observation is made repeatedly and without prompting. They say the sun sets in a different location many kilometres off its usual point on the horizon. The daylight lasts longer. The moon and stars are not where they are supposed to be.

When filmmaker Ian Mauro investigated these claims, he discovered the scientific explanation for this ‘tilted world’ thesis: global warming produces visual distortions, a phenomenon related to a polar mirage caused by warm air. It is a process called ‘atmospheric refraction.’ The elders’ observations, drawing on childhood memories and traditional ecological knowledge, enabled atmospheric scientists to confirm this hypothesis despite initial skepticism (many scientists first dismissed Inuit observations as being ‘hallucinogenic’).¹³² Notably, Kunuk and Mauro have chosen not to include the official explanation in the film, deciding instead to center voices typically excluded from

¹³¹ "If we don't have our environment, we can't survive," says an Inuit elder. "These biologists come here to study climate change, but they never ask us about it [...] they use helicopters that deafen bears, they drug and collar them, and then they claim they are endangered. It is the southerners who are endangering them."

¹³² In truth many scientists discounted and even mocked the elders’ observations. When the film was previewed at the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference (COP15) in December 2009 it elicited disparaging reactions from the scientific community. Co-director Ian Mauro says, “We had a litany of scientists come back to us, responding after seeing this news, saying, this was great to be speaking to indigenous people about their views, but if you continue to perpetuate this fallacy that the Earth had tilted on its axis, [the Inuit] would lose all credibility” (quoted in Dixon 2010). As Susan Schuppli remarks: “the Inuit’s deep ancestral knowledge of the environment in which they lived and the events that they had witnessed was insufficient for conferring a contingent legitimacy on their speech acts if their testimonials ran counter to widely accepted scientific truths” (2014, 63). However, Ian Mauro persisted in seeking further scientific opinions. As Luxen (2012) notes: “As it turns out, the sun hadn’t moved – but there was something wonky going on that scientists had missed. It’s called the Novaya Zemlya effect: a mirage is created on the horizon as hot atmospheric air meets the cold surface air, creating the appearance of a shift. This effect is exacerbated by climate change and thus, the sun’s altered course acts as a visible indicator.” See also: “Dark Matters: An Interview with Susan Schuppli,” *Dark Ecology*, 2016

climate discourse. For Kunuk and Mauro, Indigenous observations are pivotal (and not supplemental) to understanding long-term environmental transformations. If a fuller picture is to form, the domain of expertise needs itself to be shifted on its axis.

The significance of this story is that the elders generated new insights into climate change ahead of the scientific community, which challenged binaries of ‘scientific/traditional’ and ‘rational/metaphoric’ knowledge. As Mauro notes:

As a trained scientist, I know that a key test for ‘truth’ is the repeated replicability of a research finding, independent of who is doing the test. Hearing Inuit across Nunavut make the same observation, using their traditional ecological knowledge, seems to pass this credo for scientific truth... In many ways, Inuit elders speak with the knowledge of astrophysicists and environmental scientists all in one... Indeed, Inuit are climate change experts, and their knowledge complements and in some ways surpasses scientific understanding on this topic (2009).

In her analysis of the film and its reception Susan Schuppli reaffirms the need to put “different regimes of witnessing” into productive dialogue:

The point was that the Inuit may have come to the wrong scientific conclusion based on their limited knowledge about how polarized light refraction works, but their observations were not in and of themselves flawed—their eyes had not deceived them...it comes as no surprise that the scientists at COP15 were apprehensive about the seemingly hallucinatory narratives invoked by Inuit elders in Kunuk and Mauro’s film. Yet had they paid greater attention to these stories as paradigmatic of the extreme changes that were taking place in the Arctic, and recognized that only a radical proposition might begin to explain what was going on, they would have subverted the counternarrative of the false witness in which Inuit vision was deemed fallacious and therefore open to dismissal (2014, 63-64).

As Schuppli suggests, the elders were testifying to a break in everyday reality and the occurrence of something seemingly impossible. The unreality of a ‘tilted world,’ in this sense, attested to the shock of seeing an old framework shattered. That scientists could discount such a seismic change in an Inuit worldview speaks to the question “who gets to speak on behalf of the material or the phenomenon? (Schuppli 2015)”

In this chapter, I want to suggest that *Qapirangajuq* manifests new narrative practices and knowledges towards addressing the slow violence lived by Inuit exposed to climate impacts. I propose that the film upsets conventional ways of thinking about and ‘storying’ climate change (Sandilands 2016) while offering new narrative openings. Intimate and philosophical, the cinematic approach is immersive, taking viewers ‘on the land,’ sensorially emplacing the spectator, so as to closely trace the ecological and cultural effects of a warming Arctic. The film is at times surreal and otherworldly—i.e. scenes of searing red sunrises distorted by jagged fields of ice, an eerie and stammering electronic soundtrack—but it avoids any apocalyptic narrative pronouncements. The elder-stories bestow names to changes that might otherwise go unrecorded. The result is a work of mourning that defies the depersonalisation or derealisation of death and loss that frequently accompany apocalyptic scenarios. This is not the epic frame of dystopian anxiety

In lieu of a grand or mythic view, Kunuk and Mauro opt for a forensic and granular approach. There is no pedagogical summary, no narrative addendum or overarching critical vision. There is no untethered message about end times. There is just a congregation of voices elucidating a climate crime scene. And, despite the clear sense of delegation, the work does not provide any prescriptive solution or offer any call for political action. Rather, the viewer is asked to do the work of gathering and summation, principally by engaging in a labor of regard and deep listening.

As Kunuk points out, “Over the years, nobody has ever listened to these people. Every time [the discussion is] about global warming, about the Arctic warming, it’s

scientists that go up there and do their work. And policy makers depend on these findings. Nobody ever really understands the people up there” (quoted in Dixon 2010).

In *Qapirangajuj*, meaning is composed chorally—through a proliferation of accounts and the sum of intricate noticing. The film’s collectively-sourced epistemology, as I will elucidate, configures a new geography of attention and care that extends beyond biological lineation and beyond fixed networks of filial responsibility. This is a different way of ‘doing kinship.’ Most significant to my discussion, the film resists a view of the child as flag-bearer for the future. Children appear throughout this film and, yet, at no point are they portrayed as “wiser than their elders.” They are not swaddled in a protectionist rhetoric. The multigenerational view of futurity offered in this film does not presume a transferring of “moral authority and decision making from adults to younger protagonists” (Mitzi Myers in Goodenough and Immel 2008, 25). There are no saviours in the story.

This is a narrative about, and by, the collective. From its very first moments, the resolute focus on the human and the dramas of the private self, so typical in western (or ‘southern’) narratives, and so prevalent in the films I have discussed in previous chapters, is overturned. In *Qapirangajuj*, the communitarian ethos recalls the “decolonial media aesthetics” evoked by media artist-researcher Dalida Maria Benfield in which master narratives focused on individuality and the lone achieving hero are replaced by collective ways of telling.¹³³

¹³³ The film subverts the conventions of heroic environmental storytelling but Kunuk’s whole career and philosophy has supported this subversion (bent as he is towards community-based media.) His company, Isuma Productions, prioritizes collective conditions for production, dissemination and audience engagement. According to its website, “Isuma’s mission is to produce independent community-based media – films, TV and now Internet - to preserve and enhance Inuit culture and language; to create jobs and economic development in Igloolik and Nunavut; and to tell authentic Inuit stories to Inuit and non-Inuit audiences worldwide.” See: <http://www.isuma.tv/isuma-productions/about>

The result is a viewing experience that feels lateral—more akin to that of encountering music or a free-form performance than viewing a linear story. In this sense, the film is both a challenge but also an enviable marvel, prompting consideration of how disperse a narrative can become without losing its coherence and momentum. It is one thing to dispense with restrictive documentary conventions focused on a heroic quest narrative, it is quite another thing to create an open-ended composition that keeps people watching and thinking and feeling.

In its essence, the film invites reconsideration of the ways we narrate “climate change.” In the western (or ‘southern’) mainstream, we are living amidst two fairly large narratives, two outsized conceptions—the ‘Anthropocene’ and the Sixth Great Extinction. Both convey something of the epic scale of the earth’s predicament; both are contributing to burgeoning academic fields. Yet the worry in all this is how the broad general picture occludes the specific. As Michael McCarthy writes in his exquisite book *The Moth Snowstorm*, these concepts “do not necessarily convey the immediacy and astringent character of environmental loss, which in every case, somewhere along the line, involves hurt. If loss of nature becomes a sort of essay subject, we miss its immediacy; we may lose sight of its sadness and its nastiness, its sharp and bitter taste, the great wounding it really is” (65).

This distrust of the ‘big story,’ that corrals the disorderly effects of ecological loss into one neatly bordered meta-narrative, has caused some critics and writers to turn to more intimate micro-geographies—for example, the world of matsutake mushrooms (Anna Tsing), weeds (Richard Mabey), or flying foxes (Deborah Bird Rose). In a similar vein, British nature writer Robert Macfarlane has argued that we need to become intimate

witnesses and better noticers, alert to shifting ecological baselines, aware of the specific and small. “As we deplete our ability to denote and figure particular aspects of our places,” Macfarlane writes, “so our competence for understanding and imagining possible relationships with non-human nature is correspondingly depleted” (2015a). The great farmer-poet Wendell Berry has likewise called for a “whole, vital, particularizing language” as a foundation for ethics, care and responsibility (2001, 137). As he writes, “to defend what we love we need a particularizing language, for we love what we particularly know” (41).

The ‘precise,’ in this sense, is a rampart against the vague. How else but through close and situated witnessing are we to fathom slow and subtle changes to ‘earth systems’? How else but through durational attention are we to give form and meaning to a crisis that seems to be simultaneously *everywhere* and *nowhere*, a crisis that for many of us living inland, in southern cities, may feel rhetorically ubiquitous but materially remote?

Later in this chapter I propose that *Qapirangajuq* demonstrates an ethics of granular witnessing and sensory attunement that might invite non-Inuit and non-Indigenous southerners to better respond, to better feel, and (yes) to better grieve a world that “is falling apart quietly” (Jahren 279). By placing climate change within a longer historical frame, the film offers a new model of ecological subjectivity and a different understanding of ecological mourning that questions the very timescales of ‘crisis’. For the Inuit, exposure does not begin with southern declarations of a global ecological emergency. It begins with the “‘world-shattering’ magnitude of settler invasion and its attendant crime scenes” which involved mass extinctions and the collapse of certain

ecosystems (Belcourt 2017a). As Kyle Whyte reminds us: “Indigenous peoples often understand their vulnerability to climate change as an intensification of colonially-induced environmental changes”(2017a, 154).¹³⁴ They have lived through environmental collapse on intimate levels since the onset of colonialism. The perspective is not so much ‘when will the world end?’ but ‘what can we do now that we are already living in the post-apocalypse and the cycles of collapse are getting bigger and bigger?’ Kunuk and Mauro’s foremost contribution, I contend, is to beckon new ways of telling and understanding climate change, giving form to losses invisibilized and subjects dematerialized by the optics of hyper-capitalism, the frames of apocalyptic storytelling, and by histories of settler colonialism.¹³⁵

The Weather

It all starts with the weather. Vast cumulonimbus clouds. A slate coloured sky. Small shifts in the wind. Each detail builds a different scenario for the day. For a culture that relies on the land for sustenance and guidance, it is vital to be alert to intricacies. "My father would always take me outside and show me what the world was telling us," says a

¹³⁴ See also: Whyte’s article “Way Beyond the Lifeboat: An Indigenous Allegory of Climate Justice” (2017b). Whyte emphasizes how important it is for Indigenous allies to challenge public discourse that “portray Indigenous vulnerability to climate change without reference to the larger struggles with colonialism and capitalism.” As he puts it, “Such discourses give the impression that Indigenous peoples face risks only because climate change, via bad luck, happens to affect the flora and fauna they depend on” (2017b, 3).

¹³⁵ As Sarah Hunt and Cindy Holmes write: “Decolonization involves actively challenging or disrupting systems of knowledge that do not fully account for the lives of Indigenous people, queer and trans people, and many others whose lives are erased through epistemic and material violence” (159). I am indebted to Indigenous scholars who have argued that Western modernity has always been a project built on anti-Indigeneity through colonialism. Indigenous lives have been under continuous threat in this context. As Kim TallBear (2015) and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2013) powerfully note, Indigenous communities are living the afterlife of this foundational violence with its cycles of environmental collapse—a post-apocalyptic world. In other words, climate change is continuous with a process that began with colonization.

middle-aged Inuk man in *Qapirangajuq*. "I didn't realize it was educational, it was just life. We would see and hear these effects as they occurred in our lives and be able to predict patterns in the seasons and the weather. These days, it is impossible to predict anything. I gave up on that."

Weather prognostics have a special importance in Arctic environments where accurate forecasting divines the line between life and death.¹³⁶ In the past, Inuit forecasters might look to the sky to see whether a storm was on the horizon or if it was safe to go on a hunt. A prediction could be made by observing the way the wind scattered a cloud. But Inuit forecasting has been upended over the last quarter century. Old weather signals are no longer reliable. Warmer, capricious winds are coming from new directions. The cool clarity is gone. A scattered cloud might now indicate a storm that comes in an hour rather than a day.

The ancient story lines of weather are now ragged and unpredictable in an age of 'climate breakdown,' as George Monbiot calls it. In *Qapirangajuq*, the elders express a sense of bewilderment and grief at the loss of old rhythms and longstanding histories of local knowledge. The wet tide line that once signaled coming ice is elusive. The annual sea ice freeze-up which provided structure to their lives is undependable, making overland navigation challenging. The habitat changes add up to a loss of confidence, growing concerns about safety and a pervasive sense of psychic unease. In 2003, philosopher Glenn Albrecht coined a term to describe the emotions incurred by the loss of habitats and homescapes through climate change. He referred to this particular type of

¹³⁶ Inuit *Qaujimajatuqangit* refers to accumulated collective knowledge and survival skills passed down through generations. This includes knowledge of prevailing weather systems and their effect on the ecosystem.

sadness as “solastalgia” and defined it as “emplaced or existential melancholia experienced with the negative transformation (desolation) of a loved home environment” (2012). Solastalgia, to put it simply, is “the homesickness you have when you are still at home” (2012). Solastalgia is a name for grief that accompanies chronic decline and the altering of stable planetary conditions that for the last ten thousand years have supported human and non-human life.

For southerners buffered from the elements in climate-controlled homes, weather deviations (monitored on smart phones and websites) have not tended to elicit the same sense of grief and displacement. We may feel small ruptures in seasonal rhythms. We may comment on an unseasonably warm October or the strange arrival of a migratory songbird in February. We might reminisce about past weather norms, share memories of deeper snow and sunnier summers. But these remarks have tended to subside amid the clamor of daily life. The ‘weather’ is still for many of us that proverbial safe topic, a fulcrum of small talk. Any feeling of something ‘un-right’ or ‘out of step’ is easily and quickly sublimated when daily life is not immediately or ineluctably determined by meteorological changes.

Given this differential capacity to dismiss the weather, I am increasingly interested in mainstream cultural work that attempts to make the character of subtle changes visible; stories that try to bring weather variations that do not necessarily provoke comment or magnetize public concern to the attention of a world too noisy or busy or distracted to grieve. In her moving essay “Elegy for a Country’s Seasons,” for example, Zadie Smith expresses grief for the little things that are lost to climate change. “What ‘used to be’ is painful to remember,” she writes. “Taking a long, restorative walk

on Boxing Day in the winter glare. Whole football pitches crunching underfoot. A bit of sun on Pancake Day; a little more for the Grand National. Chilly April showers, Wimbledon warmth. July weddings that could trust in fine weather. The distinct possibility of a Glastonbury sunburn” (2014). Her list is both invocation and liturgy. It is a statement of longing for a now-radically altered home. And it is a commemoration of the quotidian.¹³⁷ What does it mean that season no longer follows season with “a temperate charm only the poets appreciated”? How does one cope with the loss of familiar markers, the physical and sensory signals that once defined community and home?

In Ali Smith’s novel *Autumn* (2017) seasonal rhythms are similarly out of joint. “The days are unexpectedly mild. It doesn’t feel that far from summer,” Smith writes in a section about October. Plants bloom at the wrong time; the leaves tarry on the trees. The novel’s ‘altered-weather’ descriptions are recurrent and persistent, and although these details are woven into a larger story of social disruption, the reader is never allowed to forget the feeling of seasonal dissonance. It is a powerful way to capture the ‘background’ reality of climate change, receding at times but never entirely disappearing.¹³⁸

In the work of Zadie Smith and Ali Smith, there is a growing sense that we have crossed a dramatic threshold that has transformed the literary status of ‘weather.’ The

¹³⁷ But even as Zadie Smith partakes in climate nostalgia, she simultaneously undermines it, querying the limits of elegy: “Sometimes the global, repetitive nature of this elegy is so exhaustively sad—and so divorced from any attempts at meaningful action—that you can’t fail to detect in the elegists a fatalist liberal consciousness that has, when you get right down to it, as much of a perverse desire for the apocalypse as the evangelicals we supposedly scorn” (2014).

¹³⁸ Another example is Margaret Atwood’s poem “The Weather” from her collection *The Door*: “We used to watch the birds;/now we watch the weather./White clouds, downy as pillows,/grey one like giant thumbs,/dark ones, fat with doom” (2007, 48). The “we” occupies a temporal limbo— one eye peering nostalgically into a fading past and another warily eyeing a wonky present.

weather is no longer a reliable and unobtrusive backdrop for the unfolding of human drama. The tempo of change is no longer ignorable. Weather talk that was once a “synecdoche for empty social interaction” or a form of shorthand ‘scene-setting’ is now inextricable from the “ecological crisis at large” (Fox 2013). Climate change, as Smith and Smith both demonstrate, has made a sham of human omnipotence and disconnection. Weather is now playing *us*, tampering with our stories, erupting into the foreground in erratic and irrevocable ways. As Kathryn Schultz writes, “there is nothing remotely banal about the weather. If anything, we are in mourning for that banality... Weather is, instead, at the heart of the great drama of our time” (2015).

Ali Smith’s *Autumn* attempts to bring the less obvious effects of climate change into view. It is this attention to subtle weather variations that, to my mind, makes the novel groundbreaking and what differentiates it from ‘cli-fi,’ where the story is usually set against an ‘extreme’ or ‘disastrous’ weather event. In lieu of a discrete crisis, we enter a world of chronic unease. If a ‘crisis’ is generally fixable or finite, the chronic (coming from the Latin *chronos*, which means “of time”) is incurable and without end. Implicit in *Autumn* is the belief that the stakes of subtle weather changes, as those who are most vulnerable will confirm, are devastatingly high. Just as chronic illness forces a constant uncertainty onto the people who live with it, the chronic experience of climate change causes a “biographical disruption” (Bury 1982) for those who must face ecological instability *every day*.

Autumn is what I would call a ‘novel of exposure’ and, by this, I mean a work that openly rejects the idea of climate-controlled fiction where the social realm of relations and identity is denatured and where atmospheric conditions are seen to rarely

encroach. It is a novel that refuses to locate itself outside of loss, refuses to avoid exposure. To be exposed, in this world, is to feel the significance of anomalous weather as *foreground*.¹³⁹ It is also to embrace a narrative ontology that does not start with a view of humankind in an impervious or centralized position.

This is also, apropos of this chapter, the world of *Qapirangajuq*. In the north, the choice to remain insulated from the vicissitudes of weather has never been an option. What the Inuit elders tell us, non-Inuit southerners, is that feelings of connection and exposure are experienced as intense corporeal vulnerability, that the material presence of air and clouds is felt at the intimate level of individual bodies. There is no figure-ground distinction. “When Inuit talk environment, we are one” as one Inuk woman puts it.

What the elders also tell us is that climate change is the undoing of longstanding relationships and interdependencies. When they mourn the breakdown of ancient prediction techniques and seasonal certainties, they are speaking of what has been lost and what never stops being lost. They are mourning land that “is drier than before,” lakes “that have less water,” caribou “that tastes different,” the seal that have “summer fur in the dead of winter,” the disappearance of “tongue drifts” in the snow surface that used to help people navigate. They are mourning highly particular and particulate things in a way that counters any abstract and depersonalized commemorative logic.¹⁴⁰ They are

¹³⁹ Relevant here too is the weather as Christina Sharpe describes it: “the totality of the environments in which we struggle; the machines in which we live” (2017). See chapter three for more on this.

¹⁴⁰ I encourage readers to also investigate the testimonies included in *The Caribou Taste Different Now: Inuit Elders Observe Climate Change* (2016). The book, which could serve as a companion text to *Qapirangajuq*, is a compilation of stories from 145 “elders and local knowledge holders” across eight Canadian Arctic communities who were interviewed between 2007-2010. They ranged in age from 44-92 years. The result is a detailed archive of Inuit climate observations—about caribou, lichen, bakeapples, snowy owls, yellow flowers, the moon, berries, fish, cotton grass, the ice and snow. The title is derived from an interview with a woman named Annie Lidd in Nunatsiavut/Nain, who notes: “[The caribou] taste different; I don’t know what they’re eating. Some of them are sick or something; there’s not enough patik [marrow] in their bones.”

mourning reciprocal relationships with thousands of plants, animals, and ecosystems. Instead of one lost object—the planet—there is a river of objects. There is a liturgy for multiple ends, reaching back to the first days of settler-colonialism. This is the vast timescale of Inuit grief and adaptation. No Freudian account of mourning can adequately encompass “the loss of networks—interdependencies, connectivities, relationships—between living creatures and their living and non-living milieu” (Ryan 121).

The film holds a space for this reverberating lostness. *Qapirangajuq* is posited on what it means to hear and heed an absence or silence that echoes through deep time. It offers a model of mourning, as I will detail shortly, that refuses to foreground a sovereign subject or ‘hyper-individuated’ subjectivity and that, instead, accounts for interrelations between species (Ryan 122). This embodied and living negotiation with loss (and adaptation) is accretive, ongoing, and minutely felt.

Choral Witnessing

In his non-fiction book *The Great Derangement* (2016), Amitav Ghosh addresses the heightened emphasis on the sovereign subject and the bewildering absence of ‘the collective’ in western literary fiction. Hoping to better understand this narrative bias, he sets out to examine how the novel came to disavow “the aggregate” and “the nonhuman”. He writes, “At exactly the time when it has become clear that global warming is in every sense a collective predicament, humanity finds itself in the thrall of a dominant culture in which the idea of the collective has been exiled from politics, economics and literature alike” (80). Ghosh observes that the rise of the modern novel, with its focus on the individual, coincided with the rise of the modern economic system,

which encouraged isolation. He dates this shift towards individualism to the late twentieth century in countries where the “acceleration in carbon emissions and the turn away from the collective are both, in one sense, effects of that aspect of modernity that sees time (in Bruno Latour’s words) as ‘an irreversible arrow, as capitalization, as progress’” (79). Citing exceptions, Ghosh names Tolstoy, Dickens, Achebe and Steinbeck as novelists who continued to write devotedly about “men in the aggregate” (79). He further notes that there were, and remain, writers around the world for whom “neither the aggregate nor the nonhuman have ever been absent” (80).

This focus on “the aggregate” or “the collective” is a hallmark of *Qapirangajuq*. Adopting a choral structure composed of many voices (most of which are only identified in the end credits), the film gathers meaning through a corroboration of stories, multiple storylines and prismatic shifts in focus. It refuses to conform to linear narrative traditions, rejecting “genres that temporally frame climate change as a discrete event” or work towards “crystallizing crisis” (Shukin 2015, 200). Instead, the film attempts to “materialize scenes of slow death” (Shukin 200).

In her discussion of the film, Nicole Shukin argues that Kunuk and Mauro reveal “the sovereign subject—a figure of strong will, decision and heroic agency...to be incommensurable with many people’s struggles over conditions of life in the twenty-first century (203).” In their very method, the filmmakers suggest that it is only through a polyphonic, decentralized approach that the amorphous and, in some ways, diffuse nature of climate change can be addressed. It is only in the choral and collective that we will find a model of politics and survival equal to the challenges of climate change.

Thus far in my dissertation I have examined films whose manner of narrative was always a version of the hero's quest. From Arbor and Swifty in *The Selfish Giant* to Hushpuppy in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, the focus has been on the human and individual. Viewed through the filter of a centralized character, environmental collapse (whether industrial ruin or a catastrophic hurricane) becomes a kind of incidental backdrop.

In *Qapirangajuq*, by contrast, the focus and approach invites a wider vantage point, what Shukin calls a “distributed agency that involves the non-human world.” In *Qapirangajuq*, “ice, wind, and animals are attributed a kind of agency that, again, counters modern liberal-humanist traditions that reify agency in the willing, autonomous subject” (Shukin 203). Instead of one epic human drama we encounter the micro-dramas of quotidian Arctic existence. As the focus on human individuals, character, and interiority is loosened, we glimpse various struggles, including those of plants and animals. We see a multiplicity of forms of kinship including but extending beyond the filial.

The portrait of ‘the child’ in *Qapirangajuq* could not be more contrastive with the figure of exception we see in the earlier films I discussed. Consistently, the film focuses on groups of children instead of the promise or possibility represented by a singularized child. In one scene, several kids play in the snow while a few elders recall how grandparents and parents teach the children how to live and survive on the land, how to care for wildlife and only harvest what is required. While the Inuit elders are raising urgent questions about cultural endurance, their words make it clear that care is not limited to the realm of the human. Their knowledge systems extend beyond mentorship

protocols of elders and youth, to describe kin-based and spiritual relationships with plants and animals. In lieu of individual survival, the vision offered in *Qapirangajuq* is one of collective survival, which includes dependencies and responsibilities to other life forms. If the child recedes in this story, it is not for want of love or significance. (The median age of the territory is below 25, and one-third of the residents are under the age of 15. Children are a significant constituency. The Arctic is young.) If the child recedes in this story, it is because the singular figure of the child and the privileging of baby humans cannot account for the web of relations between all human and nonhuman inhabitants of the land.

Another reason ‘the child’ is never invoked as a flag-bearer of the future, I propose, is because the threat of climate change is not distant or temporally removed. The threat of climate change is experienced in “the time of the everyday” (Shukin 201). The ice is thin *now*. The seals are overheating *today*. The emergency—or, to avoid the apocalyptic frame, let’s say *the urgency*—is a present one, not a future one.

Qapirangajuq visualizes climate change in a way that refuses to see ecological collapse as a state of exception. In Shukin’s words, “By virtue of living in unspectacular, everyday exposure to the environmental and social effects of global warming on the North, the Inuit in the film offer a kind of ecological knowledge and responsibility that makes visible the incongruity of exceptional exercises of environmental witnessing by liberal-minded, well-intentioned Southerners” (Shukin 191).

I further propose that the child recedes in the story because all humans recede in this frame. There are many moments in *Qapirangajuq* when humans seem to vanish altogether, engulfed by the land and scenes that dissolve the borders between inner and

outer worlds. Wide and distant shots of humans crossing the snowy tundra make the figures seem small against the natural setting. Exceeding ‘its place,’ the background pushes through to the foreground. In this way, Kunuk and Mauro formally enact the way Inuit subjectivity is shaped through land based practices.

For Kunuk and Mauro, the collapse of the figure/ground distinction is precisely the point: identity itself as a field of possibilities, the choral as an expression of entwinement. *Qapirangajuq* is, thus, a film that offers an alternative model for the self—not the solitary path of a singular self but rather a charged and changing arena where viewers are invited to wander and rethink the making of a subject. It also offers a means to talk about the new climate reality in ways that do not lionize isolated heroic acts and naive notions of cause and effect. In place of one—many. In lieu of the individual—the collective. The choral reminds us that genuine social change is achieved through the actions of multitudes.¹⁴¹ The choral is a figure of ongoingness.

An Ongoing Requiem

It is late in the season and the inlet has yet to freeze over sufficiently. A few decades ago, the ice would be more than a foot thick by November but now the ice is so thin it has cracked and left yawning dark holes of ocean water. The ice is a highway system in

¹⁴¹ We need new models of climate storytelling. The old genres and conventions have tended to direct us towards the apocalyptic. As Catriona Sandilands fittingly asks: “What about stories of coming of age or other personal growth and transformation in climate changing times (bildungsroman) that might serve as meditations on new kinds of global anthropocene subjectivity for young people (e.g., Ozeki’s *All Over Creation*)? What about stories that focus on the humour, pathos, interconnection, vulnerability, and resilience of communities faced with futures that are rendered profoundly uncertain because of industrial energy developments (e.g., Hogan’s *Solar Storms*)? What about stories that allow tragedy to unfold, including the realities of present climate-related losses, and that might allow us to engage in the acts of mourning that are so often dismissed as regressive in the rush toward climate “solutions” (e.g., King’s *The Back of the Turtle*)?” (Sandilands 2016).

Rigolet—lifeline to nearby towns, places to hunt, fish, trap. Without ice, there is no way out or in.

A *New York Times* reporter visiting Rigolet describes “Mr. Pottle, a 61-year-old Inuit hunter” surveying the situation. “In a lifetime in the north, he had traveled thousands of miles through blizzards, shot seven polar bears and fallen through sea ice. But this was an unfamiliar landscape” (Albeck-Ripka 2017).

What happens when the ice that forms the only way in and out of your village melts? What happens when a place that defines itself by the presence of ice, doesn’t have ice? Or as Mr. Pottle asks: “Inuit are people of the sea ice. If there is no more sea ice, how can we be people of the sea ice?” (Albeck-Ripka 2017)

While I would question the NYT article’s title, “Why Lost Ice Means Lost Hope for an Inuit Village”, and its ‘vanishing native’ framing (reproducing as it does colonial tropes of Indigenous disappearance and conjuring the customary pessimism with which Indigeneity gains public notice), the article does manage to foreground important thinking about climate change’s toll on mental health and identity. In *Qapirangajuq*, Kunuk and Mauro offer a slightly different, decolonial frame for considering this toll. The film’s mode is less that of end-time despair or epitaphic elegy than a mode of ongoingness that reconfigures grief as a politics of persistence. In a home place marked by colonial depredations, the idea that loss will come is not new for the Inuit elders. Loss has been coming since white settler contact. In this sense, the mourning done in *Qapirangajuq* rejects any “‘game over, too late’ discourse” (Haraway 2016, 56). More specifically, it rejects the genocidal colonial narrative that Indigenous peoples are people without futures. It models, instead, an intimate version of what Donna Haraway might

call “staying with the trouble” (arguably the only viable option when you have your back up against the wall.) As Haraway writes: “Neither despair nor hope is tuned to the senses, to mindful matter, to material semiotics, to mortal earthlings in thick copresence” (2016, 4).

By speaking grief as a mode of ongoingness and by witnessing in the ‘thick’ of things, the film provides a rejoinder to traditional understandings of mourning. In Kunuk and Mauro’s frame, environmental mourning cannot be neatly delineated or given symbolic closure by limiting “who is relative and what is grievable” (Braun 81) or by excluding “nonhuman beings, natural environments, and ecological processes as appropriate objects for genuine grief” (Mortimer-Sandilands 333). Nor can it be softened through a distancing lens of “aestheticism or romanticism” (Braun 75-76).

Kunuk and Mauro rework the terms of environmental mourning in a way that affirms the embedded experience of loss experienced by the Inuit elders and that highlights what is missing from what Mortimer-Sandilands has termed “romantic portrayals of loss and salvation” more common to “contemporary environmental spectacle” (334). In *Qapirangajuq*, a view from afar is precluded. The luxuries of complacent nostalgia and apocalyptic fatalism are simply not available to people whose daily interactions with their environments are so vital and proximate.

Freud’s brief meditation, “On Transience,” offers some insight into the two postures that have tended to dominate discussions of environmental loss. The piece, occasionally referred to as “Freud’s Requiem,” was first published in 1916. In the essay, Freud reflects on some of the different ways people come to terms with mortality and impermanence. The spur for the essay is an impasse that arises between Freud and a

companion, a young poet thought to be Rainer Maria Rilke, while walking in the Dolomite Mountains in Italy.¹⁴² The poet expresses sadness at the transient nature of the natural world. As Freud writes, "The poet admired the beauty of the scene around us but felt no joy in it. He was disturbed by the thought that all this beauty was fated to extinction... All that he would otherwise have loved and admired seemed to him to be shorn of its worth by the transience which was its doom" (in Von Unwerth 2006, 215).

Freud explores his poet-friend's position. "The proneness to decay of all that is beautiful and perfect can, as we know, give rise to two different impulses in the mind. The one leads to the aching despondency felt by the young poet, while the other leads to rebellion against the fact asserted" (in Von Unwerth 215). Freud concludes that the poet's resistance and disavowal (a stance that has a troubling contemporary offshoot in 'ecophobia') is an ego defense—a "revolt" in his mind "against mourning" (in Von Unwerth 217). For the poet, impermanence is a voiding of worth. But, for Freud, impermanence is worth's very basis. As he puts it, "Limitation in the possibility of an enjoyment raises the value of the enjoyment" (in Von Unwerth 216).

Kunuk and Mauro's film rejects these two primary responses to loss and transience—namely Rilke's horror-filled disavowal and Freud's elegiac celebration (or 'nature nostalgia'.) It demonstrates that there is a meaningful and layered position between the poles of Rilke and Freud, an alternative we might call active and embedded grief. *Qapirangajuq* stakes this position by questioning the very assumption of an

¹⁴² Freud and Rilke met only on two occasions. The encounter which was transposed to the Dolomites likely took place in a hotel lobby in Munich. In other words, the elegiac summer walk was imagined. In *Freud's Requiem: Mourning, Memory, and the Invisible History of a Summer Walk*, Matthew von Unwerth, himself a trained psychoanalyst, speculates on the personal and historical events that gave rise to Freud's dream-like essay.

externalized ‘nature’ that serves as background for the Western human subject in Freud’s account. (What if the figure is enmeshed in the ground? What if the land is kin, history, family, cultural heritage, *everything*?) It is worth considering how the positions mapped in “On Transience” would have changed if both Rilke and Freud had understood themselves to be “embedded in, exposed to, and even composed of the very stuff of a rapidly transforming material world” (Alaimo 2016).

Qapirangajuq offers a different understanding of subjectivity and a different vision of mourning in the everyday present: “present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings” (Haraway 2016, 1).

From a mourning perspective, the elder stories disrupt any easy recovery narrative. There is no material or symbolic substitution that can offer compensation for the ecological injury of slow violence. Living in a landscape haunted by multiple changes means the grief process cannot be brought to an end. The elders linger instead in a remembering of disappearing nature spaces, offering a more complex engagement with loss, while committing themselves to the possibilities of partial recuperation, resistance, mitigation and adaptation.

It is in through the details of their stories that we move beyond a general ‘climate change’ picture (which oddly encourages a strange dulling of the senses) toward an intimate, ground-level mapping of shifting baselines and life at all scales. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, and will elaborate in the next section, *Qapirangajuq*’s major contribution is to model an ethics and praxis of granular witnessing and sensory attunement that can potentially inspire wider responses to climate change. As Haraway

reminds us, “The details matter. The details link actual beings to actual responsibilities” (2016, 29).

From the Grand to the Granular: A Personal Perspective

I watched *Qapirangajuq* again in Vancouver in October of 2017. I had spent the day with my friend, the writer Hiromi Goto, hiking through the Pacific Spirit Regional Park, a network of trails in over 750 hectares of forest. Our focus was an area of reclaimed peat and marshland known as Camosun Bog, the traditional territory of the Musqueam people.

My hike with Hiromi was taken with moss, lichen, and mushrooms in mind. Knowing my tendency to cast my eyes upwards in search of local birds, Hiromi thought it might be interesting to acquaint me with the forest floor. Weather-wise, it was rainy and cool. The bushes and grass glistened. The soft hummocks sparkled as if they had been fertilized with a magic elixir from *My Neighbour Totoro*. We walked through mist and shades of green. We inhaled the smell of peat, hemlock and cedar. Our walk brought the effects of recent weather aberrations to life. The waterbed was still dry from a summer of drought. The lichen was bleached. The river and bog were waiting to fill with winter’s heavy rains.

I knew in Hiromi’s world, nothing was too small to matter. For several years, she has been using social media to chronicle her encounters with the tiny, less visible species of animals and plants she finds around Vancouver. From the moment we arrived, I experienced the woods through her magic, microscopic eyes—zooming in, past thresholds of ordinary attention. Bog laurel, sticky sundew, Labrador tea, hemlock cones. Patches of tiny toothed green moss. Yellow moss with hair-like tufts. It was the closest I

had ever come to a compound eye view. As we continued walking, the bog gave way to deeper growth, the trees steep and sky grazing. The earth in the distance looked gray and then dark blue and then dun brown. The mist dissipated. A fox sparrow flitted through a leaf pile. Under the pines Hiromi introduced me to fragile brittlegills with dark purplish caps and brick-coloured milkcaps. “Ah, the mushroom people,” she said in greeting.

In Hiromi’s world, plants are people. Insects are people. The organic muck is alive with kin.¹⁴³ Hiromi is heir to the late-Ursula Le Guin, relearning her being in the world—discovering that “one way to stop seeing trees, or rivers, or hills, only as ‘natural resources’ is to class them as fellow beings—kinfolk” (Le Guin 2015, 15-16). Like Le Guin, Hiromi is also a fantasy writer who believes in “subjectifying” the universe through her stories, not as an act of anthropomorphism but because “objectifying” the world had led nowhere good. “To subjectify is not necessarily to co-opt, colonize, exploit,” writes Le Guin. “Rather, it may involve a great reach outward of the mind and imagination” (2015, 15-16).

Hiromi is also a queer activist who long ago shed the nuclear family model for a more collectivist view of kinship. Her ‘peopling of’ or ‘making persons of’ the forest is an extension of her wide-kin philosophy and a tacit recognition of how vital ‘personhood’

¹⁴³ When Hiromi speaks of the “mushroom people” it is a way of recognizing humans as only a fraction of our relations. It is said in the spirit of the late Ojibwe author Richard Wagamese who writes, “‘All my relations,’ means all. When a speaker makes this statement it’s meant as recognition of the principles of harmony, unity and equality. It’s a way of saying that you recognize your place in the universe and that you recognize the place of others and of other things in the realm of the real and the living. In that it is a powerful evocation of truth. Because when you say those words you mean everything that you are kin to. Not just those people who look like you, talk like you, act like you, sing, dance, celebrate, worship or pray like you. Everyone. You also mean everything that relies on air, water, sunlight and the power of the Earth and the universe itself for sustenance and perpetuation. It’s recognition of the fact that we are all one body moving through time and space together.” See more at: <http://www.kamloopsnews.ca/opinion/columnists/wagamese-all-my-relations-about-respect-1.1237759#sthash.dUxUgrO5.dpuf>

is to our assessment of what comprises a life of value.¹⁴⁴ Hers is a worldview simultaneously informed by a commitment to Indigenous teachings, queer ecocentric ethics, Japanese-inflected animistic thought and by efforts to decenter the human. The resulting vision of multispecies sociality she has embraced is effortless and inspiring.

I was surprised and moved by Hiromi's offhand way of greeting her forest relations, and by the luminosity she found in the shadows of a fragile urban wilderness. I did not know this landscape, had no baseline against which to compare it to the previous year or the year before, no way to register the profundity of changes, but Hiromi did.

My walk with Hiromi (similar to my walks with Jack Breakfast, an artist I follow in my memoir *Birds Art Life*) offered a method and intimate praxis for noticing.¹⁴⁵ We walked with eyes tuned to the minute and evanescent. We crouched and met the forest's micro-landscapes; the *ante*-world thrumming *before* and *beneath* the city. Beneath the obvious mise-en-scene, we limned miniature vignettes—in one instance, a world of slugs and salamanders beneath a freshly rolled log.

The pointillist quality of Hiromi's attention reminded me of the Inuit elders in *Qapirangajuq*. Similarly, when I watched the film again later that evening, the pointillism, the lavishing and gathering of details shared by the elders reminded me of Hiromi. They were all particularizers. They were all observers of shifting ecological baselines—the elders out of necessity, Hiromi out of concern and intention. It struck me again that in their ways of being, ways of thinking and imagining, they were deeply and

¹⁴⁴ I still struggle with how to relate to the sentience of other creatures in terms other than human. How do we depict life that cannot speak to us? Narratives of personhood feel like an imposition, potentially narcissistic and self-serving. Yet the problem of how to encounter nature, the other, the 'vibrant' (often unseen or glossed-over) matter of the world feels pressing; the stakes of not trying feel too high. How to relate to the sentience of other creatures in terms other than human? What are the stakes involved in such a project? What aesthetic/methodological rendering can support it?

¹⁴⁵ See: Maclear, K. (2017). *Birds Art Life*. Toronto: Doubleday. www.kyomaclear.com

willfully misaligned from mainstream North American culture—refusing, for instance, the settler state’s norms of individualism and atomized belonging. This misalignment had disposed them to contemplation and mourning. It had created an emotional framework for confronting the intimate stakes of climate change. For the Inuit elders, this included a commitment to naming the loss and vulnerability that came with being “attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure” (Butler 2004, 20).

As a particularizer, Hiromi was also committed to naming. As we walked, she named the creatures we saw, scurrying on the earth, flying in the air. The forest thickened with words for particular things. The names were portals and invocations. I was reminded of Robert Macfarlane’s commitment to wild words—gathered not as a means of reifying the nominal but as a way of extending vision and care. The problem with shifting baseline syndrome, Macfarlane writes, is that it “flattens out the losses; each generation grows into ease with its new normal for nature” (2017). Particularizing love, particularizing grief, makes the living world more faceted, dimensional, and, consequently, more grievable. The small and fleeting can only be seen through a particularizing lens. Microbodies cannot survive in abstracted visual registers (such as ‘the planet’ or ‘the land’), cannot subsist in representational fields (such as ‘climate change’) that focus on the epic and large.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ In 2016, Professor Steve Alsop wrote to me about a visit he had recently paid to an expert on Scandinavian butterflies. The expert’s concern was that Climate Change has become such a dominant narrative that other notions of time (and associated phenomena) within butterfly studies were now becoming lost. The politics of climate anticipation press deeply on ecological research and species are being increasingly framed as climate indicators—small additions to the robust climate story. We are all becoming swept-up in the temporalities of our climate performance. What does this mean for less indicative species? What does this mean for a bigger, wilder, messier picture?

Macfarlane is a leading proponent of particularism. In his celebrated book *Landmarks*, he describes “precision of utterance as both a form of lyricism and a species of attention” (2005b, 4). Since February 2017, he has made it his mission to introduce a ‘word of the day’ on his twitter feed with a vision of kindling deeper perceptiveness and more creative relations between humans and the broader living world. Thus, with descriptive precision, he tells us that a *caochan* in Gaelic is “a slender moor-stream obscured by vegetation such that it is virtually hidden from sight.” The German word *krummholz* means “crooked-wood”, and refers especially to “wind-contorted trees growing near the tree-line on mountains.” A *fret* is “light, wet mist that moves in from the sea to haunt coastal lands (Northern English).”¹⁴⁷

There is the danger that a preoccupation with labeling the world risks flattening things in a different way—not least by oversimplifying the messy swerve and song of places that cannot be fixed or condensed. There is also the worry that citing nature is the first step towards staking a human-centered or colonial claim over the land. As Macfarlane himself admits, “Nature does not name itself. Granite does not self-identify as igneous. Light has no grammar. Language is always late for its subject” (2015b, 4). But words are also doorways, the more specific the word, the more likely we are to open onto the unfamiliar and unexpected, the overlooked and even imperceptible.

I would suggest that the best naming efforts are less nostalgic in disposition, than promissory. Promissory in the sense of *more to come*. Promissory as a pledge to the intimacy of more meetings, more encounters and knowings (past and present)—more

¹⁴⁷ Robert Macfarlane’s *The Lost Words* (2017), a children’s book illustrated by Jackie Morris, takes the form of acrostic poems, each one based on a word— acorn, adder, bluebell, bramble, etc.—recently excised from the *Oxford Junior Dictionary*.

singular mushrooms and moss cared for, more care via the light of a decolonial attention that seeks to learn the local Indigenous names for plants and animals. Simply put, these words and the granular courtesy they represent offer hope of sustaining attachments to intricate lifeworlds. In the words of Cree poet Billy-Ray Belcourt, “Words are worldly; not just in the sense that they proliferate and float up into the sky and become cloud-like. Words world too” (2017b).

In *Oryx and Crake*, Margaret Atwood addresses the worlding properties of language. The story’s hero Jimmy is the sole keeper of knowledge that was once shared by an entire community of people; a trove of words, images, and concepts. A recurring motif in the novel is that of Jimmy (witness, scribe, and survivor) running assorted words and passages through his mind as they come to him. He is alert to the fact that these words now have meaning only for him, and so are on the verge of emptiness and worthlessness. These are words so hollowed of meaning that they have become mere husks, relics of a vanished time. As Atwood writes:

He compiled lists of old words too—words of a precision and suggestiveness that no longer had a meaningful application in today’s world... He’d developed a strangely tender feeling towards such words, as if they were children abandoned in the woods and it was his duty to rescue them... When they’re gone out of his head, these words, they’ll be gone, everywhere, forever. As if they had never been (2003, 195).

As a writer, I too have a “strangely tender feeling” towards words. I believe that the nature words we make our own, the scientific words we learn to speak with more and more confidence and dexterity: these are the *conduits* to our connection with threatened life worlds. The loss of a linguistic heritage (as the Inuit can attest) is more than an

aesthetic loss.¹⁴⁸ It is a loss that refracts through a community’s social, psychological and political experience. When we shed words for natural phenomena, nature itself begins to fall away from care and consciousness.

As writers and educators, we have a bit of Jimmy in us—what we do (how we speak and remember, how we testify and imagine) can help take us closer to or further from the brink of meaninglessness. “Grandiose guilt will not do,” writes Isabelle Stengers. “We need to learn to notice what we were blind to, a humble but difficult art” (in Tsing et al., 2017).

Noticing is a gateway to knowing, and knowing is a gateway to intimacy and, possibly, a gateway to love. For the past four years, I have been trying to engage in this “humble but difficult art” of noticing within the boundaries of Toronto (or *Tkaranto*) by learning about local and migratory birds, plants, trees in the company of city foragers, citizen scientists and rewilders. What I have been slowly developing is a language that reveals and unlocks a relationship to the city, to its occupied and reclaimed landscapes, to its multi-species inhabitants.

This is not about lexical mastery or an attempt to pin down the world in a Linnaean manner. There has been no feeling of triumph in knowing more, in learning, for instance, the names ‘Loggerhead Shrike’ or ‘Kirtland’s Warbler’. If anything, these words have given me a firmer grasp of what’s under threat as planetary ecologies alter beyond repair, and thus given me a greater sense of sadness. A word that will forever

¹⁴⁸ See: “Inuktitut language decline in Nunavut spiraling into free fall: report” http://www.nunatsiaqonline.ca/stories/article/65674inuit_language_use_in_nunavut_is_plumetting_researcher_says/ & <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/open-letter-inuit-language-education-crisis-1.4028087>

haunt me is “extinction debt”—the future extinction of a species that is guaranteed as a result of past changes (e.g. ecosystem collapse, habit destruction), but when there is a time-lag between impact and ultimate disappearance.

The “humble and difficult art” of noticing, I have come to see, is a precursor to care. Maria Puig de la Bellacasa argues that care is more than an affective-emotional state. It is “an ethical obligation and a practical labour” (2012, 197) that “involves material engagement in labours to sustain interdependent worlds... everyday practical *doings* that engage with the inescapable troubles of interdependent existences” (198-199). Caring, in this sense, thrusts us into the mosh pit of relational coexistence and, as such, can offer no promise or reassurance of a “smooth harmonious world” (197-199).

In *Qapirangajuq*, we see that care has an intimate political dimension. It is a form of close witnessing: a way of registering what has gone awry, the shifting of navigational points, a land rendered unfixed and elusive. There is a refrain of urgency, disorientation, and desperation to the narrative address. In some situations, decline and loss are clearly irreversible. But the elders refuse to be interpellated as objects of pity. They know that their collective knowledge-making practices offer a model for the ‘southern’ world. As Susan Schuppli corroborates, in her analysis of the film: “indigenous observations and their oral transmissions are forcefully reshaping the epistemic frameworks that are required for understanding long-term environmental transformations”(2014, 59).

Put differently, *Qapirangajuq* allows non-Inuit spectators to interrogate the narrative limits of the stories we have inherited, stories that have tended to speak in “large generic units” (Macfarlane 2015) and apocalyptic frames; stories that have flowed on questionable undercurrents of nostalgia, elegy and colonial erasure. The film invites

us, instead, to turn to a visual and narrative terrain shaped by other, more embodied optics and embedded perspectives. The choral and granular become a powerful way of testifying to a disrupted ecology. The depiction of everyday rhythms and land intimacies magnifies the slow and micro-scale losses being experienced. It is a way of understanding love, personhood, and grief beyond the anthropomorphic now.

Qapirangajuq concludes with a few final thoughts expressed by an Inuk elder: “Our environment is changing. And so are Inuit. All of us are changing.” She speaks the words with visible emotion, blinking back tears. There is no definitive conclusion. No fix. This is not an arched or progressive narrative. Viewers of the film will not be permitted the luxury of a good ending. The lineation of meaning that passed from generation to generation, existing for millennia, has suffered too much breakage. The film asks ‘southerners’ to reflect on this fracturing and the diminishment of life that is transpiring. It asks, above all, that we consider environmental loss *as loss*.

What is being mourned in these testimonies is the end of easy fixes. It is difficult to bear witness to the collapse of something without rushing to replace it with something new, without wanting to act the part of the savior, without hurrying to make a symbolic gesture. But *Qapirangajuq* suggests fixing is already a judgment, fixing is already a way of saying no—no to grief, no to acknowledging the harm we can do to others.

The final image is of a sun, ferocious and red, blazing on the horizon. It is not a sign of the coming apocalypse. It is a view of the present, of what is immediate. It places past and future within the heat of now, *as it is*, in all of its sadness and difficulty.

CONCLUSION

Love and Lifeboating (after Rebecca Solnit)

I COMPOSED this dissertation over a span of two years, against the measure of time passing, amid global trials and in the wake of my father's progressive dementia.

Just at the moment that I was asking for a shift from filial narratives, I found myself steeped in family care. The unfinished intimacy of blood kin. Entanglements of love, guilt, worry, tenderness.

To *affiliate* oneself is to make common cause.

Amid my father's daily efforts to stay afloat, I made common cause with his vulnerability, bound myself to his unmooring. I witnessed the breakdown of navigational systems. I saw night become day. I witnessed seasons flip. December become March. June became October. He took to wearing a heavy woolen scarf in summer. White tennis shoes in the dead of winter. My father bellweathered climate change.

In the drift, we find new ways of tethering ourselves.

In the sea of my father's leavings, as loops of memory grew smaller and smaller, the hardest loss was his gradual loss of language. While he carved every letter into sound, trying to shape air into meaning, while he bowed his head as if pondering memory's mechanism, I plunged into the waters of language. I sought out those who moved with

ease through the sea of letters. I read, gorged on books, made every effort to think well. It shamed me, the strut of it. As if I were mocking or pillorying his silence. Yet these words kept me going, kept me afloat. I won't lie.

Sundown is when language falters. Cared for in our home on weekends, I noticed my father quieten at nightfall. My sons learned the gift of affiliating with his non-speaking presence.

There were hours of *Blue Planet II* to watch on Netflix. This natural history of the oceans narrated by David Attenborough could hold my father's attention in a way narrative film could not. Together we watched the mesmerizing sway of underwater kelp forests and sea grass. We lost ourselves in the hypnotic drama of orca in the fjords of northern Norway herding shoals of herring into tighter and tighter balls to trap the prey near the water's surface. We felt the passive, narcotic calm of a flickering television.

Our eyes were riveted to a maze of coral, to Dumbo octopus and Humboldt squid pulsing in the darkness. These other worlds, the distant diversity of the ocean's benthic depths, becalmed us.

There were no experts in our television room. No marine biologists or oceanographers. We were all on equal, mystified footing, encountering unknown creatures we had never before contemplated; plunging ourselves into the scale of a planet that made the scale of

the personal feel, well, tiny. The ocean is an enchanted and impossible world. We learned it contains 90% of the planet's biomass.

In the final episode of *Blue Planet II*, we were confronted with an awful scenario: the ocean's enchanted and impossible world becoming a warmed up, bleached, acidified, plastic-poisoned grave.

The lesson of oceans is that the tiny affects the vast. There is no faroff distant. We are all inside the scale whether we choose to see it or not.

Together, my sons and I were learning: to see with greater clarity the deep lives that rumble below the radar, to hear the grounding music of the non-speaking world.

What surprised is that even in the midst of urgency and emergency, there could be calm. There could be flat days when the water smoothed every disturbance into a glassy plane. There could be stormless days when the water became a serene mirror. My father was sick, he was well. Just like the planet. He was dying, he was living. We existed without a solid shore, in the great sea of the moment. Attritional. Incremental. Set somewhere between two points. No clear plot or path.

Chronic illness, like climate change, I came to see, toppled the idea of getting to the other side.

Lifeboats

One evening, I realized we were acquiring the posture of a family huddled on a lifeboat. The stress of living among overlapping spheres of illness and wellness was turning us small and inward.

2018. It was cold in Toronto, the coldest January 5th on record. A cold that was maybe nothing, or perhaps further reminder of the instability of the global climate system. Temperatures stood at -23c. Those *who could* burrowed into their winter dens for the duration. Those *who couldn't* waited for the city to open new warming centers and additional beds, searching for shelter wherever possible. 'A cold-weather crisis,' the news reports announced. 'No,' said the anti-poverty activists: 'A crisis of refuge. A crisis of priorities.' Enough with the makeshift emergency solutions. *We demand a national housing strategy.*

On the coldest night, when the city was colder than Mars, I pulled a book from the towering stack on my nightstand, a memoir by Ariel Levy titled *The Rules Do Not Apply*, and I halted at this passage: "all over the city, all over the world, there were people walking around sealed in their own universes of loss, independent solar systems of suffering closed off from the regular world... (2017, 157) "

I thought about the tiny vessel that had become our world as I worked the wooden oars, moving around and around in circles. Was the dream to stay in the lifeboat where we sat, with the stormy waters rocking us, our faces tilted skyward, praying for a sunbeam?

I saw how caregiving could contract a world to the size of a house or a bed; fasten you to the caregivee: the one, very particular person you were trying to keep alive.

Filial caregiving had lent a form to my life, delineated my purpose, responsibilities, what I was meant to do.

I saw how much less graspable it was to care for countless fragile ecosystems, how much more challenging to block the construction of a pipeline, to invent new arts for living on a damaged planet, to forge new multispecies collectivities!

But: I could care for my children, that I could do, and, if I chose, I could feel the added resonance, the social plaudits: I hadn't given up on the future.

“I sometimes feel that mothering stands in the way of taking care of children.... What I'd like to write about, instead, are all the ways of tending to the world that are less easily validated than parenting, but which are just as fundamentally necessary for children to flourish. I mean here the writing and inventing and the politics and the activism; the reading and the public speaking and the protesting and the teaching and the filmmaking. These things are done by definition either by those who don't have kids at home, or by those whose kids are being looked after by other people – by states, grandparents, friends.” —Christina Lupton

If there is a point to be made, I suppose it's that care (whether under the flag of parenthood or neighbourhood, self or non-self) is no guarantee of generosity. As Maria Puig de la Bellacasa reminds us: “where there is relation there has to be care, but *our cares* also perform disconnection. We cannot possibly care for everything, not everything

can count in a world, not everything is relevant in a world – there is no life without some kind of death (2012, 204).”

The lifeboat is a bloated signifier in climate discourse. It is a harbinger of our collective fate if the great ship of humanity fails to change course.

The lifeboat is also, in the present tense, what we see drifting in the Mediterranean—a reminder of global governmental failures and the ascendance of neoliberalism where too frequently “to care for others is to refuse to preserve life if it lies outside a market value” (Povinelli 2011, 159).

Drift by Caroline Bergvall is another book on my nightstand. It is a long book of poetry that tells the true story of a boat transporting Libyan migrants that ran out of fuel mid-passage on the Mediterranean Sea in March of 2011. The boat drifted for fifteen days; while the seventy-two passengers on board sent distress calls to passing fishing boats, cruise liners and NATO warplanes. Sixty-two of the migrants eventually died of thirst or hunger. Seen but not rescued, the case of the "Left-To-Die Boat" has become a metonym for the crime of non-assistance.

These days whole countries are being described as lifeboats. A lifeboat region is defined as an area that will remain habitable in the event of catastrophic climate change. Ireland and England, we are told, will be the last remaining refuges as displaced and stressed populations flee sea level rise and wildly destructive weather, as suffering disperses.

Suffolk, Bedfordshire, Wales and the Western Highlands—all possible safe havens in the event of disastrous flooding.

The International Organization for Migration estimates between 25 million and 1 billion additional refugees will be created by man-made climate change by 2050. Where will they go? Who will rescue them from the waves?

Two more books on my nightstand, these ones ancient and blue: a 1911 edition of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and a 1911 edition of *The Life Boat and Its Work*. The first book belonged to my father and is the only item that remains from his working-class British childhood. The endpapers are decorated with pencil drawings of ships. He was a child of the Blitz, shuttled from one foster home to the next in the bomb-saturated Borough of Bromley. At the age of eleven, seeking to avoid the casual cruelty of other children, he often spent time hiding and drawing in his foster family's Anderson air raid shelter. Drowning in unhappiness, he drew one boat after another. Twelve years later, he sailed on a ship to Canada with \$50 in his pocket. A new life.

The second book (*The Life Boat and Its Work*) is a short, brisk guide, which opens with the lines: "It is not to be supposed that lives were not saved from shipwreck before the advent of the Life-Boat. From time immemorial there had been gallant rescues by all kinds of boats; and they continue to the present day. But the Life-Boat has saved thousands of lives which would otherwise have been lost."

The problem with a lifeboat approach to climate change, Janet Fiskio tells us, is that it is inherently apocalyptic. It promotes a particular perspective on human nature, namely the specter of individuals struggling for survival in a neo-Malthusian world of diminishing resources.

In this frame, climate refugees are cast as the ‘problem;’ international climate debt and historical responsibilities get de-emphasized and erased. At worst, we descend into a world governed by what Amitav Ghosh (citing Christian Parenti) calls the “politics of the armed lifeboat,” in which the rich protect themselves from the poor through sealed and militarized borders, ferocious anti-immigrant policing, and the anti-black carceral state (Ghosh 143).

But the lifeboat narrative depends on a fallacious premise: that there is a dearth of lifeboat space and a shortage of provisions in the world. This kind of sink-or-swim *scarcity thinking* perpetuates the distributive injustices that have allowed ‘sacrifice zones’ to emerge. It denies resources to those who have lost the most. It impoverishes the commons by presenting human nature as inevitably governed by fear, self-interest and violent individualism.

As the brilliant and compassionate John Berger once put it: “The poverty of our century is unlike that of any other. It is not, as poverty was before, the result of natural scarcity, but of a set of priorities imposed upon the rest of the world by the rich” (1992: 234).

To lift care out of the lifeboat is to reveal the not-so-subtle violence behind the idea of limited caring capacity.

In *A Paradise Built in Hell*, Rebecca Solnit offers another take on ‘human nature.’ She puts forward the possibility that climate change, rather than becoming a Malthusian or Social Darwinian nightmare of struggle over scarce resources might instead offer an opportunity to restructure our public life and sharing of public goods. Call it *bounteous thinking*. *A deluge of solidarity*.

If the ‘lifeboat scenario’ is connected to the genocidal breakdown of compassion and mutual aid, in the second ‘collective scenario,’ “humanity is imagined as essentially courageous and generous in the face of climate chaos (Fiskio 14).” In the latter story, we are capable of building and maintaining a public disaster response infrastructure that exists to help everyone.

A Few Facts about Lifeboats: A lifeboat is a safe haven until it meets a bigger storm. A lifeboat is a safe haven until more people want to get onboard. A lifeboat is, in essence and by definition, provisional. It requires a vital adjustment of your body and its needs. It may get you through the emergency but it cannot carry you forever.

What happens after the dream of drifting away from danger, after the safe moment in clear beautiful water?

“The sea rises, the light fails, lovers cling to each other, and children cling to us. The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out.”—James Baldwin, Nothing Personal

For months I cultivated the focus necessary to care for my father and continue work on this dissertation but as I traveled deeper into my father’s illness, care required breaking away from the family cave, countering protectionist tendencies and the fantasy of arrogant independence. We needed help.

We spent hours in clamorous waiting rooms and memory clinics, in hospital wards full of beeping monitors. Despite the privacy curtains, the hush of communal living and collective being suddenly loudened. In crisis, partitions become thin as cloth.

This chorus, with its tune of fragility and finitude, instructed me. This choral song of ill bodies and aging bodies, bodies reliant on civic and medical infrastructure, on public care and support, alerted me to what I wasn’t hearing—the pull and flow of dialysis, the ocean roar of ultrasound, the overheated precarity and messy faltering beneath the smooth flow of everyday life.

In the waiting room, I saw that care is not always tied to salvage and repair. The hospital was storm ward. Poor, sick, disfigured, alone. Social vulnerability was made plain.

Then Hurricane Harvey was in the news (then Irma, then Maria), and I saw the disastrous degree to which weather emergencies deepened other, prior vulnerabilities. All those people fighting to find a way to shore, whose world was now more water than earth, more

wavering than solid. I wondered: Where did they get their meds when the pharmacies closed, when floodwaters ruined essential drugs? Did collective viral loads increase?

Before Houston residents could lose hope after Hurricane Harvey, a flotilla arrived. Volunteers from across Texas, and from neighbouring states such as Louisiana, poured into the city on boats to join the official rescue effort. In late summer of 2017, as rain pummelled down and roads rushed like rivers, emergent modes of assembling and collectivity were unfolding.

The fleet of boats in Houston recalled, for me, a scene several months before when a group of Pacific Islanders paddled halfway across the world to visit the Canadian tar sands. Prime Minister Trudeau's recently approved pipelines will unleash catastrophic climate change—for Pacific Islanders this means rising sea levels threatening their homes, communities, and cultures. So, in May 2017, the Pacific Climate Warriors embarked on a journey to bear witness to the project responsible for unleashing destruction on their homelands. Along the way, they built solidarity with Indigenous communities in Canada whose traditional territories are threatened by the tar sands.

What was floated was a proposition about kinship and connection. The Pacific Climate Warriors showed that care could have a wide circumference.

“We know ourselves as part and as crowd, in an unknown that does not terrify. We cry out our cry of poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone” —Edouard Glissant, “Poetics of Relation”

Around the time the Pacific Climate Warriors were in Northern Alberta touring the tar sands region with local First Nations, I was asked to do a magazine interview discussing my creative and scholarly work. I told the interviewer that the time I spent taking care of my father was helping with my dissertation on climate change. It's deepening the work, I said, because it's making me understand durational care. It's allowing me to move out of the time of crisis into the time of the chronic. It has forced me to attend to alternative forms of time—to notice the slow, constant and non-acute as something worthy of response and care.

Thank you universe, she said.

What I was also trying to say, whether or not it came across, was that at our family's most vulnerable moments, I felt a breaking down of the opposition between caring for 'one's own' and caring for the world.

Oceans are rising—almost eight inches since 1880—and the annual average has accelerated over the past twenty-five years. If we want to make a raft, I now see, we will need to make it big. We will need to make it as big as the whole planet. Big as the galaxy. And as we work, it might do us well to repeat the words of the poet Kaveh Akbar: "The boat I am building / will never be done."

Letters

When I began, I spent some time wondering what form this project would take. To whom would it be addressed?

I wanted to be as direct and specific and accountable as possible as I threaded my argument through the convolutions of this crisis we call Climate Change, or the ‘Anthropocene’—as I traced the role of the child in our present and future imaginaries.

At one point, I considered writing the entire dissertation as a letter to my children—in the epistolary tradition—my children as proxy for the far future. (What, to paraphrase scholar Stefan Skimshire, would it mean to write a dissertation as an act of confessing to the far future?) What was the use of this literary format? Could a dissertation be a *cri de coeur*?

Among the many virtues of the epistolary form is the way the performativity of writing is foregrounded. A letter reminds us that our enunciations serve as acts of imagining not just the address but also the addressee. (What imagined community do we see in the future?)

“The exercise of writing is a lesson in the art of thinking against the grain of inheritance and illusion... in thinking otherwise, in letting the language of alterity unsettle the sententiousness of the sovereignty of selfhood and nationhood.” —Homi Bhabha (302)

I imagined I would write it to my elder son, now 17, who (jokingly and unjokingly) finds me culpable of participating in making the planet unlivable (“Thanks a lot, *mom*.”) Or I would write it to my younger son, age 13, a true fantasist, who still believes it possible to begin again, to reset the world in another direction.

Having decided, for various reasons, not to write this dissertation as a letter, I nevertheless continued to think about the epistolary as a device—the risk, the chutzpah, the beauty of its mode of address and confession—and what it might mean to write an essay to my children, or their children, or their children’s children, testing my own peripheral loyalty to the unconceived but also to the ghosts of our far futures, and how all of this is fraught with the problem of limiting our purview to human babies rather than our rich biodiverse kin, fraught also with the problem of speaking to the ‘future’, and in the name of the symbolic child.

Not every letter can assume the innocence (or silence) of the subject. The present addresses itself to the future, the future talks back to the present. There is always the chance that the addressee will have the final, mutinous word.

In this dissertation, I have traced the ways we use children as a way of thinking the future, as a way of tending the world, as a framework for teaching, as a motor for enacting policy. But, as I have argued, the frame “children” still leaves too many off the raft. It risks becoming too private and too politically loaded. The frame is full of disregard. What about those who are not our children? What about non-human children? What about those who do not abide by what is considered normatively human?

Returning to the idea of the epistolary, there are some who would argue that what is truly required is a letter to the void—to what and who have not been called into presence, to

the void of dispossessed species, to what Bhabha has called “the empty space of erasure and extermination: of missing persons, destroyed things, hidden histories, lost records, expropriated lands.”

Such a letter might encompass the world at large, its vast and complicated silences, and its bodiless future entities.

In 2014, a group of five artists (Marina Zurkow, Una Chaudhuri, Oliver Kellhammer, Fritz Ertl, Sarah Rothberg) started a project called *Dear Climate*. They wanted a new way to talk about climate change. As they say in their statement: “We wanted a different vocabulary from the one we were hearing from the ‘survival community’: instead of crisis and catastrophe, we wanted the familiar and ordinary; instead of desperation and heroism, playfulness and friendliness. Instead of imagining mass movements or calling for community action, we were interested in finding a more personal relationship to climate change.”

*Dear Climate,
We really blew it. We're sorry. We had other ideas and forgot about finitude.
But we're trying...
We hope you're still listening, and that you'll appreciate that we're trying to cultivate a new imagination.
If you'll accept them, dear Climate, these offerings will seal our promise to meet the terrors ahead and build the tolerances they will demand.
Love, Una, Fritz, Oliver, and Marina*

They invited the public to write other “Dear Climate” letters. The idea was to challenge species narcissism and invite humans to re-join the rest of the world. What would it mean to write a letter to ‘the climate’ from the point of view of another species of plant or animal or, for that matter, from the perspective of a place or atmospheric phenomenon?

What would a dammed river, a cerulean warbler, or an Arctic wind have to say to the future?

What I like about *Dear Climate* (and *Dear Future* and *Dear Tomorrow*) letters is how they ask us to imagine long stretches of the earth's history in front of us, including the possibility of futures uninhabited by humans. A missive launched forward in time is enveloped in mystery.

It is challenging to engage in such vertiginous imaginings and shifts of perspective but a letter to the future gifts us a horizon beyond the finitude of the present, human, mortal body.

When I decided this dissertation would not take the form of a letter to my children, it was not because I was afraid of cliché. (I have been known to chew on cliché, masticate platitudes, in hopes of extracting the unknown from the overly familiar.) It was not because I was at peace with my own dwindling temporality. It was not for want of worry. I worry all the time. I worry that very soon there is not going to be enough clean water. I worry about: record droughts, erratic rain belts, extreme temperature, flooding, destroyed harvests, extinction, acidified oceans, disappearing bees, Lyme disease, oil spills, mass displacement, mercenaries, fortified borders and 'anti-foreigner' violence. I worry about the writing off of entire nations and ancient cultures.

In my worrying, I know I am not alone. There is a Rhode Island poet, Kate Schapira, who, since 2014, has maintained a thriving "CLIMATE ANXIETY COUNSELING"

practice in Burnside Park, Providence. For five cents, she will talk you through your weather woes, generalized anxiety, and sundry uncertainties about the future.

“What can I tell you?” I imagine myself saying to Schapira. “My worries are boundless but I am sick of them and where they lead. I am sick of worry-inspired retreatism. I am sick to death of kinship bonds built on a kind of pre-industrial, fear-inspired nostalgia for the family that makes us blind to our power and interdependence.”

I can imagine Schapira saying: “Fear sucks. Why is it easier for us to imagine the end of everything—Dead Ocean, Dead Earth—than the end of current social and economic relations?”

“It seems to me that climate change, ecological degradation and the other anxieties...actually have the same root: a kind of hierarchy that favors and rewards exploitation and fear-based grabbiness. Great instability causes great emotional distress.” —Kate Schapira (quoted in De Bourmont and Martindale)

If this dissertation is about anything, it is about how to imagine futures in which there are no more saviors, no more sacrifice zones and no more safe havens built upon monstrous exceptions and injustices. It is about how we might begin to imagine hospitable models of care and sociality, whose contours and circumference are unknowable in advance. It is about how we might begin to grieve and practice new relations to replace our narrow inherited ones. Not against family, but against confinement. Not against children but against the cleaving off of multi-tendrilled affinities and kin-futures of expansive possibility. Not against home, but against fortresses. In a period of growing nativist sentiment and closing borders, of Brexit and the decision to end DACA, in an Age of

Trump (and his dismissal of Africa's nations as "shithole" countries), the aim is to unlock doors.

Wild Kin

Tonight, my sons and I will watch one last film together for this project: Spike Jonze's film interpretation of *Where the Wild Things Are* (2009). Like Sendak's original story upon which Jonze's version is very loosely based, the film gives weight to a young boy's emotional life. It delves into the shadows and recesses of Max's childhood and lets the monsters out. The land of the wild things, Jonze has said, is meant to be "a place where everything is wild. It's emotionally wild, geographically wild, weather wise — anything can happen at any time."

My sons have been my film companions throughout this dissertation. Together, we have watched most of the movies I have discussed and several of them, including this one in which realism and fantasy intermingle, more than once. I would like to say the films have provided a space for them to symbolize questions they have about the changing world and about the challenges of growing up. But, of course, I cannot be sure.

When we first watched *Where the Wild Things Are*, my younger son was 8 and my older son was 11. At the time, I think what appealed to them most was the idea of a magical home, the hero who journeys to a dreamlike realm where natural laws are waived. They understood Max and the restless anger that comes with feeling powerless. They recognized his dramatic inner life. They understood that a desire for independence could

coincide with a desire for safety, belonging, and community. At least I think they understood and recognized these things.

Each watching has revealed new lines of interest and meaning.

As they have transitioned into adolescence, I think they've come to see Max's journey as a form of youth rebellion. He is the anarchic child who refuses to replicate and conform, who rejects oppressive parental authority.

They have never, over the years, in the four or five times we've watched the film, seemed troubled by the ferocity of the story. Nor have they asked, as I'm told some children have: "Why is this movie so sad?"

But tonight, I will notice a shade of something different.

Although the film features just one scene involving Max at school, it is a significant moment. Max is sitting in class listening to a lecture by his science teacher. The teacher is talking about the sun. He is saying that the sun will eventually burn out.

"...of course the sun won't always be here to keep us warm. It, uh, like all things will die... And when it does, first it expands. Enveloping all the surrounding planets, including earth before consuming rapidly. The sun, after all, is just fuel burning ferociously... when it runs out of fuel... well... it'll be gone. Well, after that the solar system will go dark, permanently. I'm sure by that time, the...human race will have fallen to any numbers of calamities... war, pollution, global warming, tsunamis earthquakes, meteors...Hey, who knows, right?"

As he speaks to his class about the many ways the world could end, he doesn't realize that he is frightening some of his students.

The scene takes place in soft focus, with emphasis on Max's face. We sense Max's separation from his classmates. Framed by worry, he seems removed from them, oblivious to their existence. As Max rides home with an unseen driver in the next scene, the camera remains trained on his troubled face, again separated from the life around him.

It is difficult to watch this scene without thinking about my sons' own climate change worries and without wondering how these worries have shaped their relationship to the films we've watched (*Beasts*, *Ponyo*, *Wild Things*).

What happens next in the film? Many things. On the surface: Max feels ignored and misunderstood by his mother and his sister Claire so he runs away. Below the surface: his fear and grief makes him wild. He becomes feral with fear and grief.

Max journeys across an expansive ocean into the woods where he finds himself among a community of wild things. They are awkward and unloved creatures who are nonetheless immediately recognizable with soft human voices and human names. When Max blusters his way into becoming their leader, he promises to rule kindly and use his magic powers to uplift everyone. "I have a sadness shield that keeps out all the sadness," he declares. "And it's big enough for all of us."

Despite his efforts (to flee reality, to counter its chaos and senselessness with order), Max fails. He finds he cannot escape. He cannot save the wild things or make them happy. The world he has left behind continues to shadow this world beyond.

In a moving scene, a wild thing named Carol walks with Max across a vast plain, giving voice to his growing disquiet. Carol frets about the vast desert encroaching on the Wild Things' forest and Max, in turn, discusses his lingering worry about the eventual death of the sun.

Carol knows that the desert that formed from rock will eventually turn to dust but does not know what that will mean (the sand used to be rocks, and someday it will only be dust — and what comes after dust?) Max's observation of the sun's limited lifespan merely adds to Carol's anxiety. His fragile sense of security collapses, only to be replaced a moment later by swagger as he tries to convince Max (and himself) that a tiny thing like the sun could never concern them.

With Max revealed to be metaphysically powerless, his reign rapidly unravels, concluding with Carol bellowing: "You were supposed to take care of us, you promised!" Speaking with another wild thing ("KW") after Carol's outburst, Max realizes where the problem rests. It is not a king or ruler this wild bunch needs. "I wish you guys had a mom," he concludes. The instant he speaks these words, a realization passes across his face. It is time to return home, to be (in Sendak's original words) "where someone loved him best of all."

In one of the final scenes, Max prepares to sail back home on his raft, across choppy waves. The wild things have come to see him off. At the very last moment Carol arrives, and lets out a keening howl for Max, who howls back; the other wild things howl, too.

Tonight, as we watch this wrenching farewell scene I think of a line from Ivan Coyote's *Tomboy Survival Guide*: "*You are going to need to find your freak family. Your misfit soldiers and their weirdo army. Keep your eyes open.*"

Max has left the woods but as he sails off it is clear the wild things are still with him. So are the feelings, fears and needs of being young. He has not exorcised sadness or figured out the answers to vexing issues (such as why the sun is going to burn out.) He sails between monsters and safe havens, between his misfit family and his human home.

Tonight, my sons' faces are wet with tears. My eyes have welled up too.

These films we have watched together have not consoled us or offered fixed direction. One could ask, paraphrasing Paul Kingsnorth: what use are films in a world like this? How can they "possibly have anything to say about this great Vanishing—this gathered storm beginning to break on the shores of our civilisation?" While Kingsnorth is writing about poetry, his thoughts can be applied to other art forms.

"Can poetry save the Earth? No. But then politics, economics and science are not doing a very good job either. Poetry is not here to 'save the Earth'. But it is, perhaps, able to show us the Earth—and our relationship to it—in a way we are not used to seeing it; it is perhaps able to show us the wild truths behind the tame lies of our civilisation."

It is a particular and particulate intimacy that art teaches. Being a parent, being a daughter, being alive, sometimes feels like standing at the bow of a rudderless ship as it makes its way through a thick fog. There is no bravado or showboating when you are unmoored but what there can be is a promise to stay the course, to stay proximate to ‘trouble,’ to stay awake.

“Intergalactic, interconnected, intergenerational, international, intersectional. Our actions (or lack thereof) extend beyond our lifetimes.” —Yumi Sakugawa (artist)

Among the stories that have recently found a place in our hearts is the story of scientists who have built an ‘ark’ for frogs in the Panamanian rainforest. My younger son and I watched them on the PBS series *Nature* a few years ago. There the scientists were, deep in the water, trying to support a biosphere by saving one tiny mating pair of colored frogs at a time.



Image 5: “We are in this together” by Yumi Sakugawa (2017)

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