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From Narrative Ecological Collapse to Lagoon Reality

Young Adult Dystopian Climate Fiction as an Educative Laboratory Proposal
for the City of Venice

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the ecopedagogical potential of modern Young Adult Dystopian Climate Fiction, questioning its ability to foster ecological imagination and environmental awareness in young readers. The study begins with a theoretical framework and proceeds with the comparative analysis of three novels: *The High House* by Jessie Greengrass, *The City of Ember* by Jeanne DuPrau, and *Wilder Girls* by Rory Power. The analysis explores how these three texts portray three different types of crisis – infrastructural, biochemical, and emotive – and how intergenerational relationships between children, adults, and elders are reshaped within dystopian settings. The aim is to comprehend how such narratives function as diagnostic, cognitive and emotional tools useful to interpret today’s horrors of the Anthropocene. Subsequently, the project shifts to the fragile reality of the territory of Venice, proposing an ecopedagogical laboratory that connects literary analysis with the methods of digital storytelling, ecological mapping, and intergenerational dialogue. Ultimately, this thesis investigates whether YAD cli-fi can serve as a pedagogical tool capable of connecting a text with a territory, helping contrast youth’s future blindness while promoting a new form of ecological citizenship.

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1) Introduction

This work originates from the awareness of living in a geological era – the Anthropocene – marked by collapse: humanity has become a geo-physical force capable of irreversibly altering the planet's natural cycles (Bohm-Schnitker 2024, 40). This transformation does not only manifest through immediate catastrophic events, rather it is characterized by an often invisible and widely dispersed in time phenomenon that Rob Nixon (2011) defines as *slow violence*. Moreover, these changes do not only result in a climate crisis, but in an ontological rupture that Arundhati Roy (2020 in Nadal and Peers 2022, 7) describes as the opening of a “portal”: a bridge connecting “one world and the next”, forcing us to rethink the ‘machine’ that we have built (7).

Within this global framework, Venice emerges as a brutal and paradigmatic case. The city is not a mere aesthetical backdrop, but a proper ‘sacrifice zone’ where slow violence is silently and willingly accepted by the city bureaucratic system for the greater goal of gaining short term profit (Pain and Cahill 2022, 363). While the city is slowly physically sinking under high tides, the entire ecosystem of the lagoon is suffering by the incremental rising of the sea level, being consequently affected by the phenomenon of the marine-ization (D’Alpaos and Carniello 2010, 114).

In addition to this physical collapse, the territory is challenged by a social crisis as well. The phenomenon of the “gentri-touristification” (Cristiano and Gonella 2020, 7) is gradually attacking the city, transforming it into a ‘commercialized carcass’ and depriving it of its social heart: the residents. As a result, Venetian residents are unwillingly leaving their hometown to settle on the mainland while the extremely fragile and vulnerable ecosystem of the lagoon transforms into a consumption product.

Even though scientific data on climate crisis proliferate, the “so-called information deficit model” (Becklas and Baumann 2024, 64) still shows some limitations: the mere possession of information and technical understanding of a circumstance such as climate change does not automatically produce changes in behaviour and increase public engagement (64; see also McWilliams 2024, 6). On the other hand, the abstract nature of the crisis often generates a severe future blindness – the inability to imagine alternatives to the extractive present that is consuming the planet – or an “affective impasse” (Carlill 2024, 2) that paralyzes one generation after another, transforming people into a complicit audience or, more tragically, into ‘spectators of ruins’. Hence, from here stems the necessity to explore

how literature, and more specifically young adult dystopian climate fiction novels, can transform scientific data into emotional experiences, and paralysis into agency.

Even though the literature regarding the topic of the climate crisis is vast, it often lacks the connection between dystopian imagination and pedagogical praxis focused on a specific territory. Therefore, this research questions how this connection can be practically explored, and it does so with the involvement of the local youth, aiming at helping them become active citizens and, consequently, environmentally aware individuals capable of widening their actions from the local to the global level.

The research question of this thesis is: How can YAD cli-fi spark and enhance Venetian youth's ecological imagination; and, consequently, how can this type of novel transform it into an ecopedagogical praxis that activates their agency within the context of a crumbling ecosystem?

This question originates from my personal academic journey. The classes and laboratory experiences attended during the past years, as well as my interest towards young adult dystopian narratives, have alimented my concern about the ecopedagogical purpose of literature, specifically in relation with the Environmental Humanities and the imaginative dimension of narrative forms. Moreover, the decision to focus the proposal locally to the territory of Venice originates not only from the relevance of this site within the context of the Anthropocene, but also from my long-term living experience in this city. Given that I have had the opportunity to notice over time the environmental and social changes of the area, slow violence has now become visible and tangible for me, strengthening my urgency to investigate educational practices capable of re-igniting critical awareness and situated citizenship in local young adults.

Consequently, to answer the research question, this work starts from *material ecocriticism*, which helps to 'read' the city and the lagoon as if they were a material text. Moreover, the theoretical framework is based on Freirean's *ecopedagogy*, which is a critical pedagogy aimed at the "conscientization" (Misiaszek 2020a, 6) of the students, and based on the employment of praxis.

To do so, three novels have been selected to conduct an analysis on different crisis scenarios and on their young protagonists reactions. These novels are: *The City of Ember* by Jeanne DuPrau, *The High House: A Novel* by Jessie Greengrass, and *Wilder Girls* by Rory Power. While the first and the third are explicitly categorized as young adult novels, *The High House* is only categorized as climate fiction. Nonetheless, given the clear, simple, and direct language used by the author, I believe that this novel could constitute a precious

addition to this analysis, and that it might positively challenge the young students. The decision to analyze these specific novels is based on their ability to offer three distinct models of collapse – infrastructural, biochemical, and affective – that work as the cognitive scaffold necessary to understand the reality of the lagoon.

The work is organized in three main parts – each containing two chapters – that shift from the literary analysis to the concrete practices of ecopedagogical care. The First Part constitutes the theoretical framework. While Chapter Two delineates the fundamentals of ecocriticism and of the new environmental pedagogies, exploring global ecoliteracy and the surpass of the affective impasse; Chapter Three introduces the topic of YAD cli-fi, analyzing how dystopian narratives allows young people to simulate crisis scenarios within a safe space, making slow violence more tangible.

The Second Part presents the comparative analysis of the novels. Chapter Four examines the infrastructural crisis of *The City of Ember*, the post-human metamorphosis described in *Wilder Girls*, and the affective paralysis of the Global North represented in *The High House*. On the other hand, Chapter Five will complete this analysis by integrating the intergenerational dimension. It dissects the failure of the adult world and the birth of a symbiotic agency within youth, mediated by the knowledge, wisdom, and care of elders.

Ultimately, the Third Part presents a proposal of practical application of this analysis. Chapter Six applies the three examined literary tropes to the reality of Venice, creating a parallelism between narrative types of erosions and the lagoon's real ones. To conclude, Chapter Seven presents the ecopedagogical proposal, titled *Venice as an Ecological Laboratory*, which aims to transform young students into situated stewards through the qualitative methods of ecological mappings, digital storytelling and intergenerational dialogue.

Ultimately, the goal of this work is to support future studies and practical research, and to contribute to the didactic field of the Environmental Humanities while promoting a type of education that is not only aimed at gaining new knowledge, but that would represents an act of care and resilience for the local and global youth's futures.

PART I

2) Theoretical Framework: Ecocriticism and Environmental Pedagogies

The theoretical framework of this thesis acts as a link that connects literary analysis and educational practice. It is based predominantly on the intersection of *Ecocriticism*, *Ecopedagogy*, and the narrative structures of *Climate Fiction*. Although the three chosen books of this research – *The High House: a Novel*, *The City of Ember* and *Wilder Girls* – belong to the realm of dystopian fiction and are not traditionally considered environmentalist texts, they offer a unique vantage point to examine the rupture between human history and geological time. In fact, they are perfectly built to be examined through an ecocritical lens that helps reveal hidden geological narratives; and, subsequently they can be applied with a pedagogical purpose to foster environmental awareness in young readers.

This chapter's goal is to define the boundaries of these disciplines. The first section (2.1) focuses on analyzing today's Anthropocene reality and the emergence of climate fiction as a cultural response to the anxieties of the ecological generations. The second section (2.3) explores the evolution of ecocriticism, starting from its roots in nature writing and then moving to modern criticism of global collapse; offering the reader the tools necessary to interpret the binary relationship nature-culture. Finally, the third section (2.4) shifts to ecopedagogy, investigating how literary interpretations can become transformative educational models that are able to promote socio-environmental justice and active citizenship.

2.1) Climate Fiction and the Ecological Generations

“The world we remember from our childhoods – whenever and wherever those childhoods were – is changing” (Gaard 2008, 11).

While the global climate has been changing “since the most primitive atmosphere developed on earth billions of years ago” (Gerhard et al. 2001, 1), occurring across all timescales, the current trajectory is recognizable. Anthropogenic patterns of production and consumption, which have persisted for over a hundred of years (Fuchs 2024, 102), are forging a dangerous path that is leading to a concerning warming of our planet (Thompson and Kuo 2012, 114). Indeed, this “human transformation of Earth's surface, as well as subsurface environments,

has exceeded natural processes of geological change” (Fuchs 2024, 102), causing significant, cumulative damage to the global climate (Thompson and Kuo 2012, 114). Scholars Jan Zalasiewicz, Colin N. Waters, and Mark Williams describe this phenomenon as *Anthroturbation*, a term “refer[ring] to the human penetration of the planet’s layers and the resulting geological transformation” (Fuchs 2024, 102). The many alterations that are taking place every day affect human livelihoods on a geological scale (Akyoll 2020, 17), meaning that people's capacity for survival – our ability to earn a living, find food, access water, and maintain shelter – is now directly impacted by the volatility of Earth's processes and resources (Ashworth 2025). Although the climate has mutated throughout geologic time, the “natural range of temperature conditions and the variations in greenhouse-gas concentration levels through geologic time” have now reached critical thresholds (Gerhard et al. 2001, iii). Consequently, as a result of steady emissions and rising temperatures, extreme and more frequent weather events have been witnessed worldwide, including droughts, tropical storms, sea level rise, flooding and biodiversity loss (Akyol 2020, 117).

Nonetheless, these anthropogenic impacts on climate are not merely confined to natural processes; they are first and foremost linked to the economic, social, and cultural facets of our reality (Leggewie and Welzer 2010). Greenhouse gases (GHGs) are significant contributors to social issues such as poverty, inequality, and injustice. This is largely due to socioeconomic disparities that fuel high-emission lifestyles, while climate change simultaneously exerts disproportionate effects on the poor (Nielsen et al. 2021, 1011). Then, it comes as a consequence that the adverse fallouts are manifold and largely vary across space and time, affecting “the well-being and livelihoods of mankind” (Koptseva and Pashova 2022, 280). This dynamic creates a vicious cycle where vulnerable groups are most affected by environmental damage despite contributing the least, a situation rooted in historical inequalities and power structures that favor carbon-intensive development (Nielsen et al. 2021, 1012). Some of the manifestations of this crisis include the soaring food costs, the scarcity of drinkable water, the swelling of the population, the continuous clearcutting, and the unabated violence globally against children, women, animals and ecosystems (Gaard 2008, 11). The COVID-19 pandemic appeared to have opened many people’s eyes to the anthropogenic impacts and issues of environmental degradation (Peers and Nadal 2022, 10), as well as their consequences. However, it remains to be confirmed whether this realization is going to last and translate into concrete actions to improve and safeguard our future.

Given the current unpredictable climate change that is threatening our planet, many scholars from various disciplines have tried for years to better define the causes and the

results of anthropogenic impacts. They have concluded that a joint effort to reduce GHGs emissions, protect natural habitats and wildlife, and develop sustainable agricultural and industrial practices are essential to mitigate the crisis (Nema, Nema and Roy 2012). Thus, in the last two decades, the topic of climate change has become a dominant subject, increasingly explored also within literature and critical studies (Akyol 2020, 117).

However, this crisis cannot be addressed only through scientific data; it requires a cultural perspective to translate these geological changes into human narratives. Consequently, alongside climate activists and scientists, novelists have started to “believe that they have a significant role [...] towards the environmental concerns” (Morsy 2023, 83). From this growing awareness, the new literary category of *Climate Fiction*, commonly known as *cli-fi*, has emerged.

This term was originally coined by Dan Bloom, an environmentalist and teacher who believed that the technique of storytelling held the power to shift people’s attitudes towards climate change (Schneider-Mayerson 2017, 311). While there have been multiple questions regarding the recognition of *cli-fi* as a genre, with “cultural tastemakers frequently referr[ing] to it as a genre or subgenre of science or speculative fiction” (Schneider-Mayerson 2017, 312), it lacks the more observable generic structures of a genre. Instead, this type of fiction has been recognized by scholars as a *category* (312), a topic adopted by various genres, capable of creating “a therapeutic space where collective anthropogenic anxieties are displayed, shared and worked through in a way that they have potential for encouraging the reader to contemplate on the issue and accordingly take an action” (Akyol 2020, 117).

The Indian author Amitav Ghosh has suggested that the climate crisis is fundamentally related to a widespread crisis of culture and imagination. Therefore, he argues that narrative forms like the realist novel are often unfit to describe the era we are currently living in. In his opinion, this is because realism is “ill-equipped to aestheticize the weird, strange, uncanny, and eerie phenomena of climate crisis” (Carlill 2024, 2). Moreover, Ghosh encourages writers and readers to envision possible futures (Ghosh 2016) and “imagine alternatives to a world based largely on fossil energy” (Lahtinen and Löytty, 2024) to help foresee a hopeful alternative to our own destruction. Thus, given that climate fiction is not merely concerned with the representation of physical changes and existentialist challenges, but is also imbued with psychological and emotional dilemmas (Johns-Putra 2016, 276), it is not uncommon to be “struck by the range of uses to which climate change is put as an imaginative device” (269).

Initially, the worlds depicted in climate fictions were often represented as subjected to climatic phenomena or ecological catastrophes “caused by natural environmental or meteorological reasons with no reference to human intervention” (Morsy 2023, 84). However, the focus soon shifted towards anthropogenic harmful practices, which became the primary cause of ecological crisis depicted during the second half of the 20th century (84). Nowadays, scholar Adeline Johns-Putra (2016, 267) suggests including in the definition of cli-fi only those fictions whose intent is to imagine and narrate the dystopian consequences caused by the ‘slow violence’ of anthropogenic impacts (Lahtinen and Löytty 2024, 83). Moreover, according to Goodbody and Johns-Putra (2019, 83), the term climate fiction also refers to a new sub-genre concerned with the political, social, cultural, psychological and ethical implications of man-made climate change. These scholars suggest that cli-fi novels can widen readers’ consciousness and concerns regarding the natural world by framing new phenomena, simulating different or marginalized points of view, and highlighting some neglected perspectives, such as postcolonial and gendered viewpoints (Johns-Putra 2016, 273). By framing emotions that are familiar to the readers, cli-fi “concretises an abstract and ambiguous phenomenon and brings it closer” (Lahtinen and Löytty 2024, 83) to them.

Climate fiction “follows the long tradition of storytelling that grapples with contemporary environmental concerns” (McWilliams 2024, 18). Furthermore, it constitutes a medium “that demands and rewards sustained engagement” (Schneider-Mayerson, 2017, 312) in understanding, deconstructing and representing the Anthropocene’s complex problems (312). To fully understand the origins of this narrative form, it would be necessary to look back at the evolution of the technique of storytelling itself. The 17th century can be appointed as the beginning of the modern novel, which paved the way for contemporary *environmental fiction* (McWilliams 2024, 17). However, the relationship between humans and the environment only gained prominence in literary stories in more recent years. It first appeared significantly between the 1930s and the 1940s, reaching its peak in the 1970s during the rise of the first environmental movements and the first Earth Day celebration (17), introduced by works such as *Always Coming Home* written by Ursula K. LeGuin and J.G. Ballard’s *The Drowned World* (18). Subsequently, in the 60s and the 70s, this narrative form proliferated, evolving into “*Ecofiction*, as defined by Dwyer” (Woodbury, n.d.), and becoming widely diffused (McWilliams 2024, 18).

According to Matthew Schneider-Mayerson (2017, 309-315), modern climate fiction could be divided into three broader categories that are:

- 1) Tales of “denial, avoidance, and acceptance”, which include works analyzing those psychological, cultural, and social dynamics affecting the abovementioned sentiments in regard to climate change;
- 2) “Cautionary fables of the Anthropocene”, which offer – through dystopian or postapocalyptic novels based on violence and a loss of social complexity and biology diversity – a critique of political passivity and fossil-fueled neoliberal capitalism;
- 3) Stories about the “ecopolitics of resistance, reform, and revolution”, exploring the topic of environmental politics and the effects of activist interventions.

Looking to the future, the innovative climate change novel *The Windup Girl* written by Paolo Bacigalupi presents two new promising emerging themes that are likely going to be explored more: the “transition to life after oil” and “climate injustice” (Schneider-Mayerson 2017, 316-317).

While these categories provide the framework necessary for understanding the genre, a key theme has emerged, which represents the central focus of this research: the concept of the *ecological generations*. Beyond the technical classification of cli-fi, the modern most compelling narrative tension is about the intergenerational divergence. Many texts address the problem of how today's actions are going to affect future generations, approaching different issues and “phenomena of intergenerational significance in the face of looming environmental catastrophe” (Fuchs and Maierhofer 2024, 12). In these narratives, older generations are often portrayed as guilty adversaries; yet, crucially, they are also presented as “carriers of memory” (12). The question of “Who should be blamed for global warming?” serves as a continuous reminder that climate catastrophes are not isolated circumstances affecting our livelihoods without any clear cause; instead they are the cumulative result of historical decisions and systemic negligence.

Activists have been appealing to people's sense of intergenerational responsibility by crying: “Do it for your children! [...] Children are the future, and families are responsible for their kin's wellbeing” (Khan 2020, 2). However, the objective is not to engage in a dynamic of blame and guilt-tripping, but to understand and face up front our responsibilities (Moody 2024) in order to find solutions as a united front. As will be explored in the following chapters, families serve in this type of narrative as a microcosm of the world's broader picture, becoming a representation of society's attitudes through the interactions of a multitude of generations (Khan 2020, 6).

In this context, *Young Adult (YA) literature* focusing on the environment and climate change often empowers the youth – a demographic not guilty or at fault but simply with the most to lose from climate change. Thus, an intergenerational alliance and kinship is the key to make the environment less threatening, offering a new, harmonious position for humanity to prosper within it. The power of this type of narratives lies in allowing young people to imagine themselves in potential scenarios of dire climatic realities, encouraging “creative problem-solving and imaginative fabrication of solutions” (Bernstein and Sweeney 2022, 79).

2.2) Literature and Education in the Anthropocene

The previous section has explored how climate fiction serves as a pivotal cultural response to the ecological crisis, acting as a connecting bridge between geological data and human experience. However, it is necessary to adopt a specific theoretical lens in order to fully grasp the potential of these narratives to influence the ecological generations. Concern for natural disasters is not a new trend; as a matter of fact, since the late 1990s, critics have demanded that fiction collaborate in finding a solution for global environmental issues, believing that “literature can stimulate readers to recognize approaching crises or evoke compassion towards other species” (Lahtinen and Löytty 2024, 77).

Consequently, the study of cli-fi has been recently connected with two major fields: the literary theory of *Ecocriticism* and the educational practice of *Ecopedagogy*. While ecocriticism investigates “the relationships between literature and the physical world” (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996, xx), ecopedagogy translates this understanding into a “transformation-based teaching model” (Misiaszek 2020b, 615).

A core element uniting these two disciplines is the concept of ‘place’. As noted by Bernstein and Sweeney (2022, 78), YA and climate fictions portray the close relationship between climate change and the current reality “through the setting of each story”. The relationship between humans and a place includes many dimensions such as individual, political, cultural, psychological, traditional and historical, between others. Thus, ecocritical analysis and place-based education share the aim of making students aware of local assets that they would not have noticed otherwise, deepening their understanding of valuable places and their connections with them (Hung 2017, 53-54).

2.3) Ecocriticism: Nature Writing and the Criticism of Collapse

Climate change fiction, for historical reasons, is deeply rooted in the study of ecocriticism. The term *Ecocriticism*, also known as *Environmental Literary Criticism* or *Green Criticism* (Morsy 2023, 81), is used to define a wide scope study that focuses on understanding “the relationships between literature and the physical world” (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996, xx) and that investigates questions about literature, culture and the environment (Trexler and Johns-Putra 2011, 192).

Although the concept of ecology was first formulated by the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel, and the specific term ‘ecocriticism’ was officially coined by William Rueckert in his essay published in 1978, titled *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* – aimed at connecting the use of ecology and its concepts with literature studies (Tan 2019, 23), the field gained institutional recognition only in the 20th century with the diffusion of a new and stronger ecological awareness. However, it is important to highlight that Rueckert’s work was not the first attempt at doing so; rather, it was the result of cumulative efforts made across the years (Morsy 2023, 82). The year 1992, which marks the foundation of the ASLE (the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment) in the United States, has been appointed as the official date marking the beginning of ecocriticism. Initially, this literary theory was supposed to aim at providing “a home, a community, and some academic legitimacy for the work of a new generation of literary scholars” (Gaard 2008, 11; Gaard 2009, 322) who were studying and discovering about the environment. Subsequently, the aim became also to examine how literary texts portrayed nature and environmental values; to analyse the binary nature-culture relationship; and finally, to contrast environmental problems through the humanities (12). However, it must be clarified that ecocriticism does not act as a big umbrella term that collects all the sub-groups of literary criticism; instead, it only regards some specific groups of critics (Trexler and Johns-Putra 2011, 189) whose “set of attitudes toward the physical environment” (189) is to be understood as a *praxis*.

The ‘Ecocritic’ is defined as someone who “studies the effects of culture on nature but also the effects of nature on culture and nature’s effects on nature itself as well” (Tan 2019, 24). According to the scholar William Howarth, the practice of ecocriticism is marked by four main principles: ecology, ethics, language and criticism (Tan 2019, 24-25). He explains that the first two concepts, ecology and ethics, are strongly related, as “ecological concerns gradually resulted in social and ethical matters” (25). His opinion is supported by Rachel Carson’s work *Silent Spring* from the 1960s, which is among the first and most relevant

contributions to ethical issues, and helps in the shift from a passive reflection on ecology to a more active interventionism. Furthermore, for ecocriticism are also of essential importance the two principles of language and criticism (25), both necessary to shape and communicate personal values and scientific ideas on global change (Trexler and Johns-Putra 2011, 193).

A major contribution to this literary theory came from the two scholars Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell. Given the quick changing nature of ecocriticism, Glotfelty suggests that the contours of literary studies needs to be remapped and that more unity between critics and their writings needs to be achieved, in order to adhere to the pace of the rapidly changing environmental patterns. Following this need for evolution, scholar Lawrence Buell in his book, titled *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, promotes the idea of dividing ecocriticism's history in four interrelated, chronological 'waves' (Morsy 2023, 81-82; Tan 2019, 26).

The first wave is known to be limited both in practice and scope. Its focus was on genres called "nature writing, nature poetry and wilderness fiction" (Morsy 2023, 81); and, it "is often defined to be of a descriptive nature and generally dealt with the relationship of literary texts and the natural environment" (Tan 2019, 26-27). This phase is said to start with the work *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau, and to have spread through the rising genre of *American nature writing*. Moreover, this phase allowed the flourishing of many movements concerned with the environmental topic – like *Deep Ecology*, *Ecofeminism*, *Social Ecology*, *Ecocentrism*, and *Biocentrism* (4) – that are against the anthropocentric point of view, suggesting a more ecocentric perspective based on the topics of 'transition' and 'critique of the collapse'.

The second wave was necessary after the first one was deemed superficial and insufficient. Moving away from the previous focus on ecological issues, the second wave acts more in regard to the 'social' sphere, adopting a social-centric approach to environmentalism (34). This shift highlights the inevitable and strong relationship between nature and social issues; and, as Buell suggests, a "meticulous relationship between science and culture" (35) useful to shed light onto the impactful relationship between culture and the environment (Morsy 2023, 82). The second phase is not to be considered as a divided step from the first one, but rather as a broadened continuation of or a complementary step to be added to it. In fact, it was a revision, re-elaboration, and improvement of the notions belonging to the first phase that brought back in the spotlight humans and their activities in conjunction with the non-human, on which was focused the first wave (Tan 2019, 35-36). This opened a new path towards varied forms of ecocriticism, like *Social Ecology* or *Social Ecocriticism*, and

Ecofeminism. The sub-field of social ecology, founded by the American theorist Murray Bookchin and shaped by the theories of the two socialists Marx and Engels and the two anarchists Bakunin and Kropotkin, developed a political nature aimed at pointing out the interconnection of human culture with its belonging natural environment (36).

Ecofeminism, also known as *Ecological Feminism*, is a more flexible and constantly evolving sub-field that emerged within *Social Ecology* with the aim of combining feminism with environmentalism, while standing firm against patriarchy and male-centeredness (38-39). Thus, this perspective “sees social and environmental problems as fundamentally interconnected” (Gaard 2008, 12). Moreover, the ecofeminist thought believes that “nature and ecological matters are directly related to women’s issues” (Tan 2019, 38). Hence, Gaard suggests an understanding of the destruction and distortion of nature as parallel and connected to the widespread oppression of women, associating *Androcentrism* with the responsibility of degradation of both women and nature – “Men who believe they own and have all the right over nature generally share the same intention when it comes to women” (39). Thus, the “logic of domination” of oppressive systems perpetrated by men is analyzed by ecofeminism in three steps: alienation, hierarchy, and domination. Moreover, it makes connections among multiple forms of injustice – racism, classism, sexism, speciesism, ageism, ableism, colonialism and the oppression of nature – “as part of western culture’s assault on nature” (Gaard 2008, 12).

In 2009, a third wave began, influenced by the work of Scott Slovic and centered on the concept of “World citizenship”. The focus of this wave was on scrutinizing all the aspects of human observation by going beyond ethnic and nationwide frontiers (Tan 2019, 42); and, by incorporating it into the framework of environmental justice to advocate against global capitalism and enlighten global citizens on “modern world issues like climate change” (Morsy 2023, 82). During this period, ecocriticism’s scope flourished even more than before, evolving into a socio-cultural dimension (Tan 2019, 43-44).

Finally, after the year 2009 a fourth and last wave of ecocriticism took place, focused on *material ecocriticism*, and dedicated to the discussion of the topic of corporeality to express that nature is a living entity with necessities, deeds, and demands, and not a mere passive scenery (44).

Therefore, it could be said that ecocriticism has been trying for a while to intervene actively to help find a solution to climate change. And for this reason, it could be described as an interdisciplinary movement characterized by a continuous developmental nature and a

wide diversity of approaches, which tries to examine how the non-human world is represented in literature and what it tells about the society that produces it.

One of the major steps that ecocriticism took to address the issue of climate change “has been a reconsideration of the values at its very heart – nature and place” (Trexler and Johns-Putra 2011, 193). This led to a deeper understanding of the concepts of ‘place’ and ‘setting’, and ‘global’ and ‘local’. as well as of the ideas of ‘place’ in regard to human attachments to some specific landscapes (193). According to Timothy Morton, the initial attention of the romantic and transcendentalists texts, like those of Wordsworth and Shelley, or Thoreau and Emerson, to the topics of *nature* and *place* has often represented an obstacle to the full involvement of ecocritics to the topic of climate change and its complexities (Morton 2007 in Trexler and Johns-Putra 2011, 192). In fact, Morton was of the opinion that “an overdependence on the idea of nature as an ahistorical phenomenon makes it impossible to think about climate change” (193). Therefore, he suggests a reconsideration of the core values of nature and place; which, in his opinion, represents the most significant step that ecocritics can take to address deeper the topic of climate change and push further the boundaries of the discipline.

Consequently, in accordance with Morton, Ursula Heise (2008 in Trexler and Johns-Putra 2011, 192), through her groundbreaking work *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, advocates the relevance of using the concepts of ‘local’ and ‘global’ as cultural frames to understand environmental issues. Hence, along with Volkmann’s ecocritical collection titled *Local Natures, Global Responsibilities*, she suggests in her work that rethinking configurations of the two concepts would be necessary to research literature and the issue of climate change from different perspectives (192).

Crucially, the shift from a local to a global perspective is not merely spatial, but also temporal. By adopting Heise’s concept, it would be possible to better understand how local actions of today are impactful on the future, thereby laying the theoretical foundation for the concept of intergenerational justice. Consequently, this awareness fills the gap between current habits and the previously discussed ecological generations, acknowledging that the planet that we are now shaping will be the inheritance of those that are yet to come.

2.4) Ecopedagogy and Global Alphabetization: Teaching for the Global Socio-Environmental Justice

An important aspect to take into consideration to fully comprehend the theoretical framework of this research is its transformative dimension. While Ecocriticism provides the tools to

analyze the relationship between culture and nature within literature, Ecopedagogy translates this understanding into educational praxis. Therefore, the focus will now turn to the widely known environmental pedagogies to understand how they address the crisis highlighted by climate fiction.

Environmental Education (EE) models have been often critiqued because of their lack of attention towards social issues derived from harmful impacts on the environment. As a consequence, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) models were developed in order to fill this gap. However, this approach ended up prioritizing the idea of development implied to determine progress; therefore, pushing to the background all concerns regarding the environmental wellbeing. Consequently, Misiaszek (2020b, 616) argues that to teach themes such as development “and the resulting ‘sustainability’ framings, [...] ecopedagogical reinvention that centers critical literacy” is needed.

Hence, the importance of *Ecopedagogy*, also known as *New Environmental Pedagogies*. It functions both as a separate pedagogy and a pedagogical tool within ESD and the EE, as well as a methodological research tool used to analyze “environmental pedagogies and pedagogies on the environment” (Misiaszek 2020b, 618). Although Moacir Gadotti and many of his scholar colleagues suggest that both ESD and EE models have many similarities with the ecopedagogical approach (Misiaszek 2015, 285), ecopedagogy distinguishes itself as a transformation-based teaching model (Misiaszek 2020b, 615). It is aimed at ending socio-environmental injustices and violence through utopian education models (617); and nowadays, this teaching model keeps growing, supported by the work of eco-activists, scholars, writers and environmental literature teachers (Gaard 2008, 11).

Rooted in the critical theories and educational movements from Latin America of Paulo Freire (Short et al. 2025, 2; Misiaszek 2020a, 1), ecopedagogy is a form of education literacy that guides environmental teaching and is centered on using *praxis* to understand “environmental violence, injustices, and dominance to determine necessary transformative actions” (Misiaszek 2020a, 2). Therefore, we could say that it is aimed at constructing improved environmental solutions and a better critical theorization; and, at understanding the connections between environmental and social violences or injustices, that are often structurally hidden and inseparable (2).

Moreover, ecopedagogy is based on the argument that “ending all oppressions is possible and countering fatalistic teaching that normalizes oppressions is essential” (Misiaszek 2020b, 617) to inspire students to “dream of possible utopias” (617). According to Paulo Freire, learning how to actively ‘read’ the world is a first necessary step to understand

it through transformational praxis (Misiaszek 2020a, 18). Praxis “is a complex and multifaceted goal” (18) that aims to develop eco-pedagogical literacies. Giroux suggests that “ecopedagogical teaching creates opportunities for students to move beyond the immediate confines of their singular lived experiences and participate in dialogue through which they may imagine futures that will not reproduce the present injustices and unsustainability” (Giroux 2010 in Short et al. 2025, 2).

This learning process requires the comprehension of socio-environmental injustices through *widening* and *deepening* reflections. *Widening* means taking the global perspectives into consideration, while *deepening* refers to the comprehension of local contexts and of epistemological perspectives. In connection to this, one of the questions that guide ecopedagogues in their work is: “How can we teach, read, and research through more local, contextual NIMBY¹, and widen it, still contextually, to NIABY² and NOPE³?” (Misiaszek 2020a, 2). Ecopedagogy expands the focus from the anthropocentric realm, thus our world inhabited by all humans, to include the “global sphere”, thus the whole Earth with all its humans and more than human beings. Therefore, by *deepening* young student’s understanding of local contexts with Nature, a more critical understanding of the global situation can be reached; and, students will feel more imaginative and empowered in their critical thinking (Short et al. 2025, 2-3).

Central to this work is the investigation of violence. “What are the costs of environmental violence and who suffers from it?” (Misiaszek 2020a, 1) is one of the questions that ecopedagogues try to answer with their work. The focus is always “on teaching how othering intensifies socio-environmental oppressions” (3); and, the aim is to do so by using critical theoretical lenses, like ecoracism, ecofeminism or (neo)coloniality (3).

To accomplish these objectives, specific forms of literacy are required. According to Richard Kahn, to achieve the goal of having “an ecopedagogy that aims to develop a more just, democratic and sustainable planetary civilization” (Gaard 2008, 14) there are three varieties of *ecoliteracy* to follow. The first one is concerned with seeking the development of *basic environmental literacy* to better understand the ways in which global ecologies interact at the local, regional and global levels (Gaard 2008, 14). The second, that is *cultural ecoliteracy*, focuses on offering: on one hand, “a critique of unsustainable cultures and of their features” (Gaard 2009, 326); and, on the other, a deeper “study of sustainable cultures

¹“Not in my backyard”: it refers to an environmental justice politic (Misiaszek 2020, 2)

²“Not in anyone’s backyard” (*ibidem*)

³“Not on planet earth” (*ibidem*)

and their strategies for resisting assimilation, strengthening community, developing appropriate technologies, and organizing collective knowledge” (326; Gaard, 2008, 15). The third one is *critical/political ecoliteracy*, which involves the critique of the culture concerned with capitalism, colonialism and imperialism’s anti-ecological effects. This aspect of ecopedagogy is also connected to the activist dimension, the mobilization of people for movement building, and the diffusion of more appropriate forms of ecological politics (15).

In practical terms, Ruyu Hung (2017, 53) suggests implementing a human-nature relationship in education through the principles of learning ‘about’, ‘in’, and ‘from’ the silent guide of nature. In fact, nature is the provider of many different habitats for numerous types of organisms; and, “the more habitats children are able to explore, the more imaginative and creative they may become” (53). To use the words of Greta Gaard (2008, 20), we should ask ourselves: “When we read, study, and teach children’s environmental literature, what effect do we want it to have on our children?” (Gaard 2009, 332). The development of environmental and cultural literacy will be able to provide the antidote to alienation in young readers, who will then become more keen on taking actions towards social justice and ecological democracy (15). In regard to this, Maley (2022, 348-349) suggests that these goals could be obtained by implementing the inextricably woven together “three ‘I’s: Inspiration, Information, and Implementation”. He also suggests that a good way to proceed is by starting from the individual and then by moving outwards to involve the family, the school, the community and so on, finally reaching the international level. This idea is particularly relevant for the Venetian context explored in this thesis; and, for this research’s aim to support students in grasping the magnitude of global climate change, by actively engaging them and their immediate community with the issues currently affecting the fragile lagoon’s ecosystem. Thus, to act beyond the classroom to make sure climate issues do not stay as a mere subject of study is the central objective (348).

However, “education is situated between pervasive, multifaceted forces of globalization” (Short et al. 2025, 1) *from above*, referring to oppressive neo-liberal globalization, and *from below*, that are the empowering local communities or the global masses. This mechanism helps and hinders teaching, aimed at reaching socio-environmental justice and planetary sustainability (1-2). Therefore, ecopedagogical work is essential to comprehend and build utopian education models based on the goal of finding solutions against socio-environmental injustices; and, to obtain fairer and more inclusive global justice models that comprehend both social justice and nature. This idea is “rooted in Freire’s argument that ending all oppression is possible and countering fatalistic teaching that

normalizes oppressions is essential” (Misiaszek 2025, 16).

Ecopedagogues, in order to find a way for humans to live in balance with nature, focus on answering questions like: What is development? Who is it for? Which policies are behind this? And, “How do we define *development* and *sustainability* for global (i.e. all humans, all populations) and planetary sustainability (i.e. all of Earth)?” (Misiaszek 2025, 14). Hence, another key point of ecopedagogy is the critical problematization of concepts such as *development*, *citizenship*, and *sustainability*, that are essential to fully comprehend deepening and widening actions (Misiaszek 2020b, 616); and, that are perceived as primary triggers for the emergence of public education. Education has the universal aim to address the topic of development. However, to fully understand socio-environmental connections, it is vital to teach how to critically deconstruct the politics of framings and the acts of 'development' (619). Moreover, Misiaszek (2020a, 20) brings up the problem of 'who' is that actually benefits or suffers the most from this development and its consequences, bringing to the light also the consequent impacts on the efficiency and relevance of social justice. In general, the essence of critical pedagogies is mostly focused on the point of view of the oppressed, of those who suffer the most in the anthropocentric sphere (21-22). Nonetheless, it is the act contrasting neoliberal ideologies that represent *development* as sustainable; thus, strengthening the connection with economic justice.

Ecopedagogues are often criticised because of their superficial interest in the topic of economics. However, a good understanding of economics is also essential here, given that “development and sustainability are often taught in line with socio-economic reproduction of current local-to-global power structures [that aligns with neoliberalism], rather than within economic justice models” (Misiaszek 2025, 15). Hence, when teaching about development, it is crucial to study the contradictions within neoliberal economics' foundations (Misiaszek 2020b, 620), and to contrast neoliberal ideologies that often portray development as sustainable only in economic terms.

Sustainable development needs to be deconstructed and redefined because of its impact on the construction of ecopedagogical *citizenship education*. The common definition of sustainable development is parallel “to how we define our civil obligation towards the environment in terms of how they affect our self-determined ‘fellow citizens’” (Misiaszek 2015, 286). Furthermore, the concept of citizenship education is connected with the countering of colonialism and neo-colonialism. Historically, “citizenship was not taught to benefit the colonized, but to be the objects for Development” (Misiaszek 2020b, 621), since it was often “constructed to sustain oppressions by ignoring unjust social structures and

promoting the idea that oppressions are self-acquired and self-maintained” (Misiaszek 2015, 285). Ecopedagogy and citizenship education are aligned because of the critical approach and transformational goals of the former, and the democratic approaches oriented towards inclusion of the latter. Together, they both try to form individuals that can actively take part in and change for the better their societies; with the goal of guaranteeing the well-being of all the global citizens. “Who is your fellow citizen?” (Misiaszek 2015, 286) is the new question that ecopedagogues try to find an answer to during this time reshaped by globalization. But also: “Who has environmental rights and responsibilities towards those in distant societies?” (287), given the global character of environmental issues, and the fact that geo-political borders are rarely respected, as it can happen with air or water pollution affecting multiple states at the same time (287).

Finally, ecopedagogy is able to provide the ethical and educational guidelines to turn the passive act of reading into forms of active citizenship. However, to effectively engage in this transformative process with the younger generations, it would be necessary to take into account and analyze the medium through which these messages are conveyed. Thus, having established the theoretical and pedagogical framework of this research, the following chapter will jump into the genre of Climate Fiction for Young Adults, exploring how dystopian narratives represent a unique instrument to navigate environmental complexities and make the abstract violence of climate change tangible, while fostering a new ecological imagination.

3) Introduction to Young Adult Dystopian Climate Fiction

As seen in the previous chapter, the climate crisis is a complex phenomenon that affects the whole planet and challenges significantly both science and culture. The word ‘crisis’, which originates from a Greek word that means ‘to decide’, is connected with the idea that humans have the ability to make decisions that will mitigate or contribute to climate change (Bernstein and Sweeney 2022, 78-79). Within this environmental crisis, young adult dystopian climate fiction can be used as a social and pedagogical instrument to show young readers possible ways to navigate the Anthropocene. In fact, as we will see, this narrative form is able to portray emotional, political and temporal complexities that arise from the ecological crisis, transforming them in accessible language and promoting transformative action.

Firstly, this chapter provides an historical and theoretical overview of the genre’s evolution. By tracing its roots from traditional young adult literature and dystopia, this framework helps in better understanding where it originates from and how it resonates with young readers. Subsequently, the analysis moves to the specific stylistic and narrative choices that authors employ to portray and make more tangible complex phenomena like the *slow violence* of the climate crisis. The discussion will then move from textual to cognitive and political areas, emphasizing the potential for these narratives to create a narrative epistemology that can challenge neoliberal paradigms and inspire collective action. Finally, the chapter concludes by addressing the complex affective aspect of the crisis, and exploring how fiction serves as a space to manage ecological grief, trauma, and climate anxiety. Throughout the analysis of these processes, the main aim of this chapter is to demonstrate the potentiality of YAD cli-fi as a catalyst for young readers’ critical and transformative participation.

3.1) Young Adult Literature: Between Dystopia and cli-fi

Young Adult Literature is an expression that experts consider to be “inherently slippery and amorphous” (Cart 2022, 3). While the concept of literature is generally well defined and relatively straightforward, the problem arises with the targeted audience. Historically, it was difficult to properly understand and define who or what a young adult was, especially due to society being “accustomed to seeing children become adults virtually overnight as a result of

entering the full-time workforce” (3). As contemporary critic Michael Cart notes, prior to the 20th century they were considered as the “human beings who occupied an ill-defined developmental space somewhere between childhood and adulthood” (3), and his definition has become acknowledged widely. The situation changed in 1904, when Stanley Hall ‘invented’ a new category of human being with his work titled *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Psychology, Anthropology; Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education*. Through this work, he developed the idea that little children evolve from being savages to being more civilized in the age period between twelve and nineteen, and he started to use the term *adolescent* as we would today use the expression young adult (4). Hall’s theories contributed to a gradual increase in young people deciding to go to school; and, subsequently led to an advancement in the pursuit of universal education (4). However, it was only later, during World War II, that the specific expression *young adult* or *teenager* was introduced, although at first it remained scarcely used and loosely defined (3). Until the end of the 1930s teenagers were still regarded as children. Therefore, there were not many publications, writings or separate categories of literature that targeted them specifically. This changed gradually during the first four decades of the 1900s. During those years “opinions began coalescing around the viability of recognizing a new category of human being with its own distinct life needs” (6); books began to be published targeting them, and a new youth culture emerged (6-9). Many were the books published for adolescence even during the following years; however, it was only in 1942, with the publication of *Seventeenth Summer* by Maureen Daly, “that the new field of writing for teen-agers became established” (Edwards 1954, 88 in Cart 2022, 8). Since then, many more publications and other cultural or artistic forms followed; and, this broad and diverse in scope literary category expanded and experimented with different fiction and nonfiction genres, such as: science fiction, crime fiction, gothic fiction, romance, magical realism, parody, and tragedy (Pramesti 2015, 1-8).

Around the same time, *Utopian* and *Dystopian Literature* became widespread within the broader genre of the young adult literature, “driven by an impulse to posit a better future” (Dror 2010, 41) for humankind and to provide hope “for a different and more humane world” (Zipes 2003, ix in Thompson 2010, 25). Thus, their goal was to address already existing cultural issues and to provide a critique of contemporary society, “while portraying either an ideal or nightmare social vision as comparison” (Dror 2010, 41). These two forms of fiction evolved through the years, gradually assuming a more critical tone. However, *critical utopian literature* gradually lost its relevance, given the general pessimistic views of the time. Therefore, *critical dystopian literature* ‘prevailed’ and kept evolving, with the aim

of reframing “utopian thought and offer[ing] critique and hope from a different, but complementary, narrative perspective” (42). This type of literature continued well into the early 21st century with publications specifically targeting young adults – like the *Hunger Games* saga by Suzanne Collins and *The City of Ember* saga by Jeanne DuPrau – which portray narrative settings that reflect adolescent’s modern dilemmas and realities, allowing them to find a space in which they might feel represented (Dror 2010, 30-31).

Thus, the genre of *Young Adult Dystopia* (YAD) became widespread. It is described as a hybrid genre, with the aim of both entertaining and educating (Baran 2015, 31). In fact, it includes both the characteristic dystopian traits – “such as authoritarian control, surveillance and loss of individual rights” (Gillespie 2025, 4) – of these types of narrative, and some of the elements that belong to the *Entwicklungsroman* or *Bildungsroman*. The first term, *Entwicklungsroman*, is defined by Mike Cadden as “novel of character change” (Cadden 2011, 310), and is used by Roberta Seelinger to define a type of “novel of development for young adults and adolescents in which the protagonist has not reached adulthood at the end of the novel” (Seelinger 2000 in Baran 2015, 30). The term *Bildungsroman*, similarly to the first one, is “another common genre within young adult fiction” (Primestri 2015, 5), that Cadden (2011, 310) refers to as “novel of growth”, and Seelinger (2000, in Baran 2015, 29) describes as a novel “in which the protagonist comes of age as an adult”. The combination of these different elements often results in “a politically conscious narrative with child or adolescent protagonists who serve as main triggers of the action” (Baran 2015, 30), highlighting the developing connection between the transitional adolescence period and the need for more conscious social and political actions. Hence, YAD provides a fitting space to portray the development of its protagonists, while adopting the didactic nature typical of children and young adults literature (29-31).

The world depicted in dystopian texts is “full of violence, manipulative technology, extreme poverty, totalitarian governments and military control” (Conlon 2020). Therefore, within the YAD framework, *technology* represents a crucial theme to take into consideration, being it a cultural product of our society. It is defined by Marius de Geus as the “instrument to satisfy the incessantly increasing desires of humankind” (1999, 22 in Dror 2010, 46), and is crucially connected to our modern reality characterized by globalization and multiculturalism, and affected by the environmental crisis. Technology has become a fundamental “part of western civilization and is now enmeshed in the landscape” (Dror 2010, 46). It is an often debated political topic, relevant for the young adult dystopian cultural critique. In fact, according to the concepts presented in Elain Ostry’s essay *The Role of the*

Young Adult in Environmental Degradation, in order to accurately portray the contemporary world situation of young adults on paper, it is crucial to consider both the environment and technology (51). Therefore, the aim of contemporary young adult dystopian fiction is to challenge young readers into thinking “about current social and political issues, and engag[ing] in debates about the relationship between people, technology, and nature”, along with considering and testing these aspects hierarchies and adolescents own role within them (Thompson 2020, 5). In this way, the young protagonists of these narratives become challenging figures that “eventually rebel against the status quo, become less complacent, more socially conscious and more mature” (Baran 2015, 30), providing an example to the reader.

Contemporary young adult stories often combine dystopia and its characteristic element with climate fiction due to the increasing role of environmental crises in transforming our cultural and physical realities in dystopian societies. Climate fiction, as we have seen in the previous chapter, “[moves] beyond merely warning about potential catastrophe” (Chitra 2025, 71) extending and transforming dystopian literature’s same functions, and shifting the focus from political oppression to individuals and societies adaptation to ecological crises (71), while maintaining the same pedagogical and developmental concerns that are common in young adult literature. This intersection has led to the creation of a new category that can be defined as *Young Adult Dystopian Climate Fiction*.

3.2) Narrative Strategies: Making the Crisis More Tangible

Modern reality is characterized by a “wide-ranging environmental destruction” (Lahtinen and Löytty 2024, 84) that is leading to the gradual, almost imperceptible and cumulative “*slow violence* of living day-to-day with climate collapse” (Carlill 2024, 7). When people are confronted with uncertainties and risks that they are not capable of addressing properly, “they tend to resolve cognitive dissonance” to continue with their daily life (Arnold 2018, 8). Thus, it is important to assess how to successfully communicate fearful messages about climate change to keep people’s attention for a prolonged period of time (8-9). This storytelling is difficult to do through traditional narrative formats. Therefore, to answer this issue, authors like Alice Carlill (2024, 4) suggest going back to climate realism. In fact, they believe that this narrative form could convey the affective experience of living in a climate crisis through

a new formulation of realism's ontological foundations, by incorporating “what were once mere ‘generic outhouses’ into the mansion of so-called serious fiction” (4).

However, it is challenging to represent on paper the climate crisis “due to its temporal and spatial scales, scientific complexity, and gradual, often invisible manifestations” (Chitra 2025, 73). Climate fiction, with its traditional apocalyptic, pastoral and satirical sub-genres (Goodbody and Johns-Putra 2019, 5), has the potential required to make people reflect on their choices and on the risks associated with them (4). Many authors have collaborated in developing temporal, scale, affective, and linguistic strategies to make this topic more accessible to readers both at the cognitive and emotional level (Chitra 2025, 73-75). Yet, the challenges are many.

Regarding the temporal problem, the developed strategies include the use of: *intergenerational* or *fragmented narratives* characterized by a multiplicity of narrators (Carlill 2024, 89) and generations involved to present from different timeframes the problem of climate change; *temporal juxtapositions* that connect “present actions to future consequences” (Chitra 2025, 73); *flash-forward devices* to reveal future climate impacts for a brief moment before coming back to present times through the ‘anticipatory memory’ technique (Vermeulen 2017, 420 in Chitra 2025, 73); and, *geological temporalities* to address “the deep time of the Anthropocene beyond human historical frameworks” (Zylinska 2014, 18 in Chitra 2025, 73).

According to Ursula Heise (Goodbody and Johns-Putra 2019, 7-8) in regard to the problem of scale, “climate fiction has to imagine how planetary transformation might affect particular places and individuals”. She believes that to solve this issue of spatial disjuncture and to understand global issues a thorough inspection of local sites and of the personal reality would be needed to understand global issues. In fact, climate change comprehends “complex interactions between global systems and local impacts” (Chitra 2025, 73). To navigate these scalar issues, the techniques suggested are: *character networks*, that create a ‘mesh’ between different characters’ stories and relationships across a multitude of climate experience’s scales; *embodied climate experiences* that connect environmental processes with bodily distressful experiences of ‘trans-corporeal narratives’ (Alaimo 2010a, 7 in Chitra 2025, 74); descriptions focused on *infrastructure systems* to create “scalar narrative pathways that connect individual and planetary dimensions and processes” (Yaeger 2011, 343 in Chitra 2025, 74); and, *nonhuman perspectives* that provide an expansion beyond human perspectives to take into consideration alternative scales (Chitra 2025, 74).

People's emotional response to the crisis may vary, and they might often be in a state

of denial. According to Robbins and Moore's (2013, 12 in Chitra 2025, 74) "emotional paradox of climate change", the strategies able to contrast this issue need to maintain "psychological engagement with overwhelming environmental threats without succumbing to despair or disavowal". This could be done through the techniques of: the *emotional witnessing*, that employs "first-person narration of climate impact [to create] emotional engagement with environmental suffering" (Keen 2007, 142 in Chitra 2025, 74); *ecological grief narratives* that portray experiences of environmental loss and mourning; the incorporation of *hope structures* to create positive visions of successful actions; and, aesthetical moments of *ecological wonder* to give some relief from narratives on the catastrophe (Chitra 2025, 74).

Finally, in order to properly convey the topic of climate change, new linguistic frameworks that are able to represent the current unfamiliar phenomena would be necessary: *neologisms*; the *integration of scientific discourses* and terminology; the use of *reclaimed or repurposed terminology* to give "new environmental meanings to familiar words" (Chitra 2025, 75); and, *linguistic code switching*" between different discourses (experiential, scientific or political) to reflect the multidisciplinary nature of the topic (75). The aim would be to develop "a vocabulary adequate to the Anthropocene" (Clark 2015, 45 in Chitra 2025, 75) capable of aiding the narrative form of the fiction to represent climate change's challenges and the modern environmental conditions.

3.3) YAD Cli-fi Narratives From the Text to Reality: Making Sense of Climate Crisis and Exploring Possible Futures

While the specific narrative and linguistic strategies discussed in the previous paragraph provide the technical framework, this paragraph will discuss further the underlying cognitive mechanisms of YAD cli-fi narratives, and their capability to transform abstract threats of climate crisis into an emotionally perceptible experience oriented towards action.

Global warming is seen as a marginal concern by most people, "much like 'violence on television' or 'growing trade deficits'" (Hamblyn 2009, 234 in Arnold 2018, 2). This happens because it is difficult to grasp the full complexity of the issue when the public's opinions and their perception of risks are culturally influenced (Arnold 2018, 2). Given this disconnect between public perception and scientific data, the technique of the storytelling emerges not merely as a creative choice, but mostly as a cognitive necessity. Since childhood,

we more or less explicitly experience that “narrative structures allow us to gain understanding of events and how they relate to one another and to our lives” (2). According to Dan Bloom, the powerful means of storytelling (Akyol 2020, 117) is what is needed to make more tangible complex phenomena full of data, economic reasoning and empathy for others, such as climate change (Arnold, 2018, 1-2).

Within this narrative framework, YAD cli-fi functions as more than a cautionary tale; it provides a “therapeutic space where [adolescents’] collective anthropogenic anxieties are displayed, shared and worked through” (Akyol 2020, 117). Rather than offering escapist solutions, this type of narrative has the potential to encourage young readers “to contemplate on the issue and accordingly take action” (117), helping them overcome fatalism and equipping them – who have the most to lose – to shape possible alternative futures. These types of stories portray and empower young narrators or protagonists who take action to contrast the negative consequences of climate change and other harmful impacts (Bernstein and Sweeney 2022, 79), changing in the meanwhile the readers’ attitudes about the topic (Akyol 2020, 117). According to Bernstein and Sweeney (2022, 79), in this way the imagining that comes from this act of narration “is not only an act of creation, but a willful expression of re-creation and future molding”, that helps young readers seeing themselves in difficult circumstances and “forces circumspection around issues spotlighted in the texts”.

3.3.1) The Structural Role of Narrative Epistemology

This transition from abstract and distant data to tangible experiences is rooted in *narrative epistemology*: a way of knowing the world through story structures that “grows out of the belief that our initial means of making knowledge about the world is narrative, not paradigmatic or logico-scientific” (Fleckenstein 1996, 924).

Storytelling progresses from the text to the real world to make climate change and its mechanisms more tangible. Moreover, it does so through a *sense-making* process, that is a fundamental aspect of literature, and through cli-fi's ability to be speculative and hybrid, which helps overcoming limitations in representing climatic phenomena. Thus, crisis realities are re-created within the safe confines of literature, and young readers are allowed to reimagine their worlds in a subversive way. Through the fabrication of possible interventions and the encouragement of creative problem-solving solutions, these imaginative and malleable types of fiction may help give hope and relieve the stress of the crisis, providing

informed education (Bernstein and Sweeney 2022, 79). Young adults' dystopian and post-apocalyptic narratives depict “bleak imagined futures – futures in which the natural environment has been rendered uninhabitable and the individual is deprived of agency” (Thompson 2020, 25). Mendlesohn, Nikolajeva, and other scholars have argued that YAD fiction is fundamentally perceived as pessimistic, and built on fears and guilt (25); while John J. Han et al. argues that it appeals “to popular adolescent issues such as self-identity, thrill-seeking, and romantic angst” (2018, 5 in Thompson 2020, 26), making it a “productive place to address cultural anxieties and threats as well as to contemplate the ideal” (Hintz and Ostry, 12 in Thompson 2020, 26). Hence, these types of fictional stories play a fundamental role in taking on the climate crisis, given their capability of transmitting to the readers the crisis' catastrophic consequences in a way that is not only intellectual, but also personal and touching.

This literary genre's effectiveness is analyzed through a set of cognitive and narrative processes, including the *construal level theory*, *transportation*, and the *anthropocene ordinary*. According to Matthew Schneider-Mayerson (2018, 476-483), people' distant psychological perception of the climate crisis phenomena is an example of a high-level construal, which means that the crisis represents an abstract and vague concept that is dispersed in time, space and socially. Moreover, generally referring to cli-fi stories, he affirms that they can help contrast this effect by moving the crisis to a more low-level construal, thus turning it into a more proximate, detailed and specific reality that helps the reader “to visualize the ramifications of climate change on us as humans” (483). By making the crisis' consequences more tangible, the narration shortens readers' psychological distance from the issue and “lead to higher levels of concern and stronger intentions to engage in behaviors to mitigate climate change” (476). For example, by domesticating the crisis in familiar locations, these texts capitalize on spatial proximity to make the events more realistic or believable (487-488) and transform ecological shifts into local and personal stakes.

While shortening the psychological distance is essential, the effectiveness of cli-fi also relies on the depth of the reader's engagement, a process known as *narrative transportation*. Cli-fi stories also help the readers engage their brains in meaningful ways by figuratively ‘transporting’ them into the story, and by making them live “in the character's shoes or experience[ing] their reality in some way” (McWilliams 2024, 14). Narrative transportation gives readers the opportunity to focus on “subjects that had previously been unknown” (Schneider-Mayerson, 2018, 488), presenting “skeletons of alternative realities” (McWilliams 2024, 13) on which audiences can build alternative simulations through the

process called *Simulation Heuristic*. This process, on one hand reinforces “the salience of the subjects contained within the storyworld”; and, on the other hand, “increases the perception that an imagined scenario is true” (14).

However, the impact of this narrative immersion extends beyond simply making the crisis feel more personal or eliminating the angst associated with non-fictional readings (Bernstein and Sweeney 2022, 79). Its true power goes beyond individual immersion: it extends to the readers’ perception of the very fabric of their daily lives through the lens of *climate crisis ordinariness*. This concept is embedded in the process of giving new attention to ordinary everyday life, by measuring “the impasse of the present” (Carlill 2024, 4); and, by assessing and mediating whatever might occur and be perceived as overwhelming.

Focusing on the ordinary brings us to the concept of climate realism, which is an “adapting, evolving, and innovating” (3) instrument used to inquire the *structures of feeling* that contribute to political inertia. Described by Adrienne Ghaly as a literary strategy that emphasizes the ordinary in rapport with what is horrific and extraordinary to respond to the climate crisis’ dissolution (4), this realism focuses on LeMenager’s *everyday Anthropocene* concept. According to LeMenager, the “novelistic mode” is the best form to express this paradigm. Therefore, the project of the *everyday Anthropocene novel* concentrates on giving attention to what it means to live day after day as fragile and individual bodies with a climate change crisis “that never quite come to a head” (5). By anchoring the global catastrophe in the domestic and mundane, cli-fi transforms the Anthropocene from a distant event into a lived, affective reality.

Consequently, this literary approach reveals a disturbing truth: that the narration of daily experience of the Anthropocene often hints at the latent dynamics of ecocide that have always upheld ordinary livelihood (5). In this context, to live in a climate crisis ordinariness might “equate to political quiet if not indirect complicity to ecocide” (1). Consequently, the ultimate goal of the everyday Anthropocene novel is to navigate this complicity and imagine a project focused on “making home of a broken world” (5). This aligns with Berlant’s view that the present is the principal temporal domain of realism and is “perceived, first, affectively” (Carlill 2024, 4). Here, the “impasse induced by crisis” (4) becomes not a stopping point, but the designed genre to track the sense of the present and respond to political inertia.

3.3.2) Intersectionality and Socio-Environmental Justice Challenges

Acknowledging the ordinariness of the crisis, as discussed in the previous section, necessarily raises the question of who is most vulnerable within this ‘broken world’. As we have seen, narrative epistemology allows the reader to make sense of the crisis; nonetheless, it also forces a confrontation with the fact that this crisis is not experienced equally. Exploration of new possible futures cannot be a neutral endeavor, but rather must confront the power stratifications that define the crisis.

In eco-conservative criticism, there is a tendency to see a monolithic ‘us’ as the culprit for the climate crisis (Botelho 2024, 20). However, both YAD cli-fi and ecopedagogy reject this universalization of the fault (Misiaszek 2020a). The cli-fi genre highlights how “the accumulation in the atmosphere of greenhouse gases is mainly the result of the gargantuan consumption of the developed countries” (Ghosh 2016, 4) from the Global North; and, that vulnerability is distributed unequally along the inseparable axes of *race*, *place* and *privilege* that collide to create and perpetuate the climate crisis (Bernstein and Sweeney 2022, 78). Schneider-Mayerson (2018, 477-479 in Lahtinen and Löytty 2024, 84) suggests that a sense of environmental justice may arise in cli-fi readers, prompting empathy and understanding towards those who are affected, and bridging the emotional and cognitive distance between privileged and disadvantaged groups of individuals. It can be seen when YA texts portray the real negative effects of the crisis that extremely affect marginalized communities, or when young protagonists are empowered with the responsibility of changing the future trajectory of climate change while being the least guilty for these needs of remediation (Bernstein and Sweeney 2022, 79). This demand for justice leads to a systemic critique, as the exploration of alternative futures requires identifying the socio-economic roots of the current impasse.

It is at this intersection that the literary genre of YAD cli-fi aligns with the educational goals of ecopedagogy. Beyond simply portraying injustice, cli-fi stories function as narrative mental trials that allow the reader to test possible alternative realities within a ‘safe space’. This is valid also for the imagination of a future world that is not governed by neoliberalism and that does not rely on fossil fuels and infinite consumption patterns. According to Murray Bookchin (1995, 120 in Tan 2019, 91), “the ecological crisis we face today is very much a crisis in the emergence of society out of biology”. Hence, “the source of environmental problems inevitably lies in the various social constructs of our Western society” (Tan 2019, 91). Here, literature and ecopedagogy share a common political project:

both acknowledge this problem and move a systemic critique against the dominant economic model and all those social constructs, like “all forms of hierarchy, domination, patriarchy, class struggle and state policy” (91) that have led to the current ecological crisis. Their shared argument is based on the idea that the climate crisis is not an accident that was brought upon us (Fredriksen 2025), but is actually the result of a specific economical mentality based on perpetual growth – the “grow or die” mentality, described by Bookchin as an “ecological cancer” that needs to destroy our natural world to keep expanding (96). Just as ecopedagogy specifically aims to unmask these politics by revealing their oppressive nature through transformative praxis to end “all socio-environmental injustices and violence” (Misiaszek 2020a, 617), YAD cli-fi dramatizes this struggle, revealing the oppressive nature of market theory and highlighting the necessity to build a planetary justice for both humans and more-than-humans (615).

Ultimately, contemporary young adult dystopian cli-fi narratives suggest that overcoming the ‘grow or die’ mentality requires a shift from individual survival to radical forms of collectivism. While neoliberalism deeply relies on the illusion of individual autonomy, development is inherently collective. Hence, the most effective solutions to achieve sustainable development are cooperation and collective actions (Misiaszek 2020a, 629). Young adult literature offers both technical ‘solutions’ and a guide to achieve adaptation through collectivism (Ballard, Roche and Welsh 2025, 48). More specifically, these modern stories can challenge “solitary, consumption-based measures” (Schneider-Mayerson 2018, 494), focusing more on presenting radical forms of collectivism that go across “temporal, spatial, social and even species boundaries” (Ballard, Roche and Welsh 2025, 51). These narrations allow readers to experience a ‘collective agency’, showing how survival is based on cooperation and kinship, instead of individual autonomy (60).

3.4) Climate Crisis and Affectivity: Climate Anxiety, Environmental Grief and Inertia

This shift towards collective agency is particularly urgent given the psychological toll of the crisis. In the past few decades, the communication and storytelling about climate has significantly increased. The cultural discourse has focused on stories about misanthropy, natural disasters, and general trauma, creating a contradictory narrative: while it depicts a doomed reality where human agency seems pointless; at the same time, it also demands readers to urgently take actions. This dissonance may possibly result in negative impacts on

mental health and, paradoxically, in general inaction.

The impacts of climate change on mental health are multiple. Stress, suicidal ideation, reduced happiness, grief and anxiety are amongst the most common effects caused by anthropogenic impacts and climate change; and, they mostly affect underserved communities, front-line communities and youth (McWilliams 2024, 10). Despite the wide diffusion of fear-based communication that is increasingly taking place, a significant shift towards more hopeful communication frames has been registered in more recent times (McWilliams 2024, iv).

Climate Fiction, for example, can be used as a means to convey and relieve the affective experience of living in a climate crisis; which is a time often characterized by a numbing ecological grief that implies a bigger political inertia. This paralysis or apathy is often associated with the sentiment known as ‘Anthropocene horror’. It is defined by Clark as “the affective collateral of feeling personally implicated in latently violent systems that are nonetheless beyond individual control” (Carlill 2024, 14). Hence, this horror is a widespread worry not well understood and identifiable, connected to our own existence in the world. This sentiment captures and conveys the horror that derives from recognising the magnitude of scale effects of someone’s actions, giving a name to the experience that emerges from the realization of the “inescapable ‘lack of proportionality’ of one’s actions” (14). According to the clarification of Michael Rothberg, this awareness transforms individuals into “implicated subjects”: people who are not necessarily the “direct agents of harm, but nonetheless occupy positions aligned with power and privilege” (14), thereby contributing to some degree to such control and impactful regimens. This feeling of structural guilt is clearly illustrated in *The High House*, when Caro reflects on the futility of her and the other protagonists’ past attitudes: “‘We should have done something’, I said, ‘we should have tried[.]’ ‘Tried what?’ asked Grandy, and I knew that he was right, but still it didn’t rinse us clean from blame” (Greengrass 2022, 83).

While acknowledging the *Anthropocene horror* is a necessary step toward awareness, it does not guarantee not being crushed by the worst affective sentiments. Writers like Clark, Berlant, Munoz, Duggan or Luciano note that this realization often leads to depressive episodes, grim realities, the oppression derived from the awareness of living within a damaged world, and of sentiments of despair, psychosis or suicide (11). The reality of affectivity during a climate crisis is characterized by a coalescence of emotions like shame, guilt, fear, desperation, rage and grief. The term *climate anxiety* – that can be interchanged with *solastalgia*, *eco-anxiety*, *eco-grief*, or *climate grief* – is becoming “increasingly

widespread as an understanding of anthropogenic climate change grows” (10). *Ecological grief* is defined by Clark as “the emotional response to the loss of an object with which an individual has a personal relationship and attachment” (14). Therefore, we could say that it is a reaction derived from the collapse of ecosystems caused by human impacts. Also, it is often felt for the loss and the threatened destruction of the landscape, of a *place*, or for a specific species, along with apathy and inertia, that might be understood as an ‘affective impasse’.

There is a critical debate going on about the efficacy of *ecological grief* as a catalyst for actions towards the environmental safeguard. According to some studies, moderate levels of stress work as a catalyst to take action; while for others, it is the first cause of impairment at the mental, emotional or behavioral level (McWilliams 2024, 10). On the proactive side, Ashlee Cunsolo’s theory of ecological grief “builds on and departs from Freudian theories of mourning and melancholia” (Carlill 2024, 15), and is closely linked to Donna Haraway’s model of engagement pondered as “staying with the trouble” (16), suggesting that grief might constitute a form of productive ‘meeting’ (17). According to Cunsolo’s theory, the ecological mourner is determined to stay in a deliberately melancholic state: on one hand, holding onto their attachment to that object or ideal that preserves what has been lost; and, on the other, moving towards taking pro-environmental actions (16). From this point of view, grief is both a form of ethical care and political resistance. However, this is a precarious balance. Dwelling deeply with ecological grief and inhabiting this melancholic stance increases the risk of developing depression (15). When the grief becomes too overwhelming, instead of motivating action, it may lead to a “disengagement from the ecologically-threatened world around us” (17). As some theories suggest, depression derived from climate change is seen as “extremely improbable to bring any action” (17) capable of preventing the worst ecological collapse.

In this context, climate fiction plays a crucial mediating role. According to Goodbody and Johns-Putra (2019) climate fiction can act as a medium through which we can better understand the mental mechanisms behind the experiences of inertia and skepticism. Moreover, narratives about climate change are perceived to act as a ‘safe space’ for this type of sentiment. They become spaces in which to challenge the fears and anxieties derived from the ecological grief’s phenomenon (Leavenworth and Manni 2021, 730). It has been seen that through texts that discuss this topic, such as climate fiction, the reader has the opportunity to process their anxieties through the experiences of the characters of the narration. Ecological grief and loss are perceived and looked at differently by both the distinct characters and the human readers. As Greengrass (2022, 135) poignantly illustrates through the words of Pauly:

“It is possible that, if things were otherwise, then the fact that I have no memory of my mother would seem a greater loss – but, as it is, her absence is only a smaller part of the whole. I have forgotten an entire world”.

This might represent the anticipated loss for a potential future, as in the case cited above, or a cumulative loss perceived day after day, or a phenological disruption, or the loss of ordinary milieu. Moreover, this experience is differentiated by generational differences as well. It depends on the fact that everyone has different “reference points by which change and concurrent loss is noticed and chronicled” (Carlill 2024, 11-13). And, the different losses can create different types of ecological grief both in the characters and the readers. Ultimately, by voicing these varied types of loss, YAD cli-fi validates the intergenerational trauma of the Anthropocene and offers a ‘vocabulary’ for interpreting grief, which is the necessary first step to take in order to achieve collective agency.

PART II

4) Models of Collapse and Resilience in DYA cli-fi Novels

The following two chapters are going to examine how today's world's collapse is portrayed in contemporary dystopian young adult climate fiction novels. This chapter investigates the phenomenology of the collapse itself. It focuses on the 'how' and the 'what' of the catastrophe, defining it not as a definitive end, but as a transformation of the habitat. While Chapter Five will focus on the agency of the characters, addressing queries of intergenerational responsibility and relationships, guilt, and the role of the 'memory keeper'. The aim is to answer questions, such as: in what type of world are the characters forced to live? How are the infrastructures failing? How is the environment revolting against humans? And, how are the biological boundaries of the human body re-shaped?

Within the Anthropocene reality, collapse is not an instantaneous and isolated accident; rather, it is a slow process of degradation that leads to new configurations. Analyzing this phenomenology through *The City of Ember* (2003), *The High House: A Novel* (2021), and *Wilder Girls* (2019) is crucial to answer the research question of this thesis. To this end, Chapter Four identifies three different models of failures. Each novel presents young readers with a unique environmental disaster: DuPrau depicts a closed underground system where technology is failing; Greengrass's climate realism describes rising tides and their relentless invasion; finally, Power's visceral narrative tells the story about a virus's biological insurrection. In these narratives, the environment – comprehensive of both the interconnected natural and human made realities – is not presented as a mere setting, or a forgotten background; rather, it is an active protagonist that handles the establishing of the terms for survival. Consequently, these novels serve as a rehearsal of ecological imagination that offer young readers the cognitive scaffolding necessary to visualize the threats they face in their own reality by exposing them to different crisis scenarios.

This chapter's analysis will first look at the crisis of infrastructure, by studying the mechanical and resource-based collapse portrayed in *The City of Ember*. Here, the threat is represented by darkness, and the aim is to convey the fragility of human-made systems. Thus, resilience takes the form of an epistemological awakening that leads to a better understanding of the machine, to escape it. Secondly, there will be a shift to the topic of the slow violence of climate change to examine the crisis of inhabitability and the topic of inequality. In *The High*

House, collapse takes an atmospheric and hydrological shape. This text's focus is not on fixing a machine, but on portraying the paralysis of the Global North when the world struggles, and the physical inability to stop environmental disasters. Here, resilience is found in the strength of the protagonists' decision making; however, it is compromised by grief and the ethical dilemma of being in a privileged isolation. Finally, a more radical form of collapse is proposed in *Wilder Girls*, which will move towards an investigation of the crisis of the biological self. A virus, called the Tox, will constitute an agent of evolution that helps depict the dissolution of the boundary between the human and the more-than-human. The failing infrastructure here is the skin itself; and resilience is not about finding a solution, but about embracing a post-human metamorphosis.

4.1) *The City of Ember*

4.1.1) The Subterranean Dystopia and The Sustainability Crisis of Infrastructure

The City of Ember is the opening book of a trilogy written by Jeanne DuPrau that was published for the first time in 2003. The protagonists of this story are the two teenage classmates Lina Mayfleet and Doon Harrow, who took upon themselves the responsibility to save the people of their doomed city (Rahayu and Syamsudin 2023, 125). Unlike the open and ruined landscapes that could be found in other climate fiction stories, *Ember* is characterized by an artificial and almost claustrophobic architectural space, featuring narrow pathways and a dark ambience (Abbas 2019, 7). Thus, it functions as a closed ecological system that has to sustain life underground, following the destruction of the Earth's surface (Rahayu and Syamsudin 2023, 125). Through the eyes of Lina and Doon, immersed in this model of subterranean dystopia built as the last shelter for humanity, the reader explores the internal, systemic collapse of the city driven by infrastructure decay and gradual natural tendency toward entropy (Karpouzou and Zampaki 2024, 259).

Ember is suffering a sustainability crisis. The city depends "on the lights from the streetlamps hanging on the side of the streetlamp poles" for illumination (Rahayu and Syamsudin 2023, 130); and, with its buildings, streets, and hidden tunnels it "was carefully planned and built by the builders so that the people could survive living underground" for as long as needed (130). However, energy is limited and the city completely relies on a single giant hydroelectric generator that has become old and is starting to fail, leaving the people of

Ember to experience more and more long moments of total darkness (125), and signaling the coming end of the technological civilization: “‘The blackouts!’ cried Doon. He jumped from his seat. ‘The lights go out all the time now! And the shortages, there's shortages of everything! If no one does anything about it, something terrible is going to happen!’” (DuPrau 2003, 13).

This failure could serve as a metaphor for a modern global fossil fuel shortage, as Ember has almost completely depleted its reservoir of energy that was originally prepared by the city’s builders; and now has no alternative way to regenerate it, thus inevitably declining. Moreover, the slow violence of this collapse has an expiration date, which is “for at least two hundred years [...] or perhaps two hundred and twenty” (DuPrau 2003, 1). However, the expiration date of two hundred and twenty years has passed and the citizens’ shelter has officially turned into a trap (Rahayu and Syamsudin 2023, 126).

Furthermore, the apocalyptic collapse portrayed in this story is not accidental nor sudden, but is the result of multiple factors that led to the slow deterioration of the character’s material lives underground (DuPrau 2003, 45); turning Ember into an example that illustrates the socio-political consequences of resource scarcity (Rahayu and Syamsudin 2023, 129). The economy of the city is based on a stock of supplies, like light bulbs, medicines, and canned foods, which is finite and cannot be reproduced:

“Sorry,” the clerk would say when a shopkeeper asked for ten packets of sewing needles, or a dozen drinking glasses, or twenty packages of light bulbs. “There’s a severe shortage of that item. You can have only one.” Or else the clerk would say, “Sorry. We’re out of that entirely.” “Forever?” “Forever.” (DuPrau 2003, 100).

This scarcity leads to a rigid rationing system that is managed by bureaucratic control. According to Gifford Pinchot, “natural resources, if properly managed, are for all practical purposes limitless” (Taylor 2021, 27). Even though Ember is an underground city which cannot replace artificial consumption objects, it has a greenhouse where to grow food, a river that provides water, and plenty of citizens with practical skills to benefit the entire community. However, the current Mayor Cole, has become increasingly corrupted by his greed and is conducting an exaggerated lifestyle, taking for himself most of the food supplies that were originally intended to be shared with the citizens; serving as an example of how collapsing societies are often characterized by corruption and hoarding mechanisms (Rahayu and Syamsudin 2023, 129).

“Everything. Food, clothes, boxes, cans. Light bulbs, stacks of them. Everything. Piles and piles up to the ceiling”, [Doon’s] ... eyes grew wide. “And someone was there, in the middle, in the middle of it all, asleep”. “Who?” A look of horror passed over Doon’s face. “The mayor,” he said. “Conked out in a big armchair, with an empty plate in front of him” (DuPrau 2003, 158).

The mayor’s greed is not merely a plot device; it is a symptom of the system’s unsustainability that characterizes “YA dystopia’s rigid and repressive regimes [...] enforced through the enslavement and silencing of citizens” (Basu et al. 2013, 4). In a finite world, the survival time of the collective can be drastically compromised by an individual resource accumulation (4); as a result, Ember metaphorically transforms into a sieve, a recipient that is gradually losing its ability to sustain life. From an ecopedagogical perspective, DuPrau’s narrative focus on systemic visibility serves as a useful tool for environmental awareness. By engaging with this novel, students are trained to critically question the origin of their resources and recognize the fragility of their own artificial environments.

Recognizing the fragility of this structure leads to the necessity to have a change of perspective. Thus, in *The City of Ember*, resilience becomes an epistemological awakening aimed at reaching a new configuration of knowledge. The city infrastructure cannot be fixed because it was intentionally designed to end; hence, the citizens can only be saved by recognizing that the system has become obsolete (Rahayu and Syamsudin 2023, 126). Like many other young adult dystopian novels, which “feature an awakening, sudden or gradual, to the truth of what has really been going on” (Basu et al. 2013, 4), we witness here at the awakening of Lina and Doon. They take upon themselves the task to decipher the “instructions for the Egress” (DuPrau 2003, 171) – fragments from a forgotten manual – and, in doing so, to transform the material history of their city into a physical map that may lead to the outside. Finally, it is significant that these instructions are damaged and fragmented, chewed up by Lina’s toddler sister (92), because it perpetuates the idea of the fragility of intergenerational memory; showing how knowledge can degrade if not actively preserved (56) and reconstructed by younger generations. Thus, Lina and Doon’s work is not merely an exploration, but mostly a restoration of an almost completely lost archive.

4.1.2) The Social Structure and The Role of The Educational System

On one hand, the infrastructure of Ember conveys the material decay of the city; on the other, the city's social structure acts as a mechanism designed to keep the order within the collapse. In young adult fiction, institutions like schools have a dual purpose that is to connect and socialize children, but also to “teach [them] to accept institutions that define their existence” (Thompson 2020, 230). In the case of DuPrau’s novel, the educational system of Ember has not been designed to foster socialization or critical thinking, but has been organized to enforce the status quo through the production of what Michel Foucault calls “docile bodies” (Foucault 1977, 138 in Thompson 2020, 230). In this way, the citizens’ energies are exclusively channeled into labor, limiting their knowledge and awareness of the structural crisis that is going on all around them.

Ember operates as an artificial organism where the generator “beats like a heart in the background” (Zuhair and Yaroub 2019, 194) and the citizens work as the mere cells within the broader machine. This mechanization of their human lives culminated during the “Assignment Day”, an important “coming of age ritual” (Thompson 2020, 156) that marks the transition from childhood to workforce: “Grown people did their work, and young people [...] went to school, [until they reached the age of twelve years old. Then, during their] “last day of their final year, which was called Assignment Day, they were given jobs to do” (DuPrau 2003, 5).

During this ceremony, students are called in front of the mayor and asked to randomly draw a slip of paper from inside a bag; then, they start a three years long internship based entirely on chance (Rahayu and Saymsudin 2023, 126). This randomization highlights the system’s perception of citizens as interchangeable components, assigned to carry out vital activities for the survival of their city without questions and doubts. As noted by Thompson (2020, 156), this rite of passage denotes the functioning of the dystopian principles and mechanisms, and “symbolically stands for entry into the adult world and thus acceptance of the prevailing social order”. By framing work as the citizens’ ultimate civic duty, the mayor successfully distracts them from noticing his ongoing corruption and the failure of the infrastructure.

Consequently, the school acts as an instrument of institutional blindness. By teaching children not to ask questions and forcing them to memorize *The Book of the City of Ember*, the curriculum asserts the idea that nothing exists outside the city’s borders, promoting a

geography of ignorance: “The city of Ember was made for us long ago by the builders,” the book said. “It is the only light in the dark world. Beyond Ember, the darkness goes on forever in all directions” (DuPrau 2003, 25). This approach reflects what ecopedagogic theories define as a “hidden curriculum”: a pedagogical strategy where a system tries to suppress citizens’ curiosity to present the current order as “natural and unquestionable” (Misiaszek 2020b, 617). By convincing children that the world outside of the city is a void of eternal darkness, the educational system effectively stops them from dreaming of alternatives or utopias that differ from the current governing system (Misiaszek 2020a, 34). If the citizens of Ember believe that their city is the only standing light in a dead universe, they would never attempt to leave, thus unconsciously contributing to the stability of the regime and consciously accepting the crumbling of the city all around them (Zuhair and Yaroub 2019, 193).

This enforcement of collective ignorance is a foundational act of collective amnesia. Through the words preserved in an old hidden notebook found by Lina, the reader discovers that the Builders deliberately severed the intergenerational connection with the Earth to make Ember’s children grow without any knowledge and sorrow for the outside world, and dependent on the ‘safety’ provided by the system itself. However, in doing so, they also erased knowledge and skills necessary for their survival:

Bring no book, they said, and no photographs. We have been told to say nothing, ever again, about the world we come from. But I am going to take this notebook anyhow. I am determined to write down what happens. Someday, someone may need to know. [...] There are a hundred of us, fifty men and fifty women. We are all at least sixty years old. There will be a hundred babies, too – two babies for each pair of “parents”. I don’t know yet which one of these gentlemen I’ll be matched with. We are all strangers to one another. They planned it that way; they said there would be fewer memories between us. They want us to forget everything about the lives we’ve led and the places we’ve lived. The babies must grow with no knowledge of a world outside, so that they feel no sorrow for what they have lost (DuPrau 2003, 258, 260).

The ‘safety’ provided by this amnesia eventually becomes a lethal trap. And, without the memories from the outside world on Earth, the citizens lack the cognitive tools necessary to imagine a solution to their generator’s problems. It is from this lack of memories that Lina and Doon’s resilience unfolds, not as an abstract sentiment of hope, but as a subversive

material act that begins when they decide to deviate from their prescribed paths: they exchange their assigned job roles of Messenger and Pipework laborer. This simple act of disobedience allows them to combine their perspectives and to use their curiosity to decipher fragments of truth – putting together the instructions, trying to understand the noises coming from the generator, and studying the city tunnels – that the system wants to keep hidden. By rejecting the “docile bodies” (Foucault 1977, 138 in Thompson 2020, 230) model and by going against the ‘hidden curriculum’ taught at school, they are able to transform the cues that they find within the city’s debris into a physical project of evacuation, proving that survival sometimes requires breaking the rules of the institutions that are meant to protect them.

4.2) *The High House: A Novel*

4.2.1) Climate Realism and The Affective Paralysis of The Global North

The High House: A Novel is a dystopian climate fiction story, written and published in 2021 “during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic” (Bartosch and Hoydis 2025, 4) by Jessie Greengrass; and, it offers a sharp counter-narrative to the adventurous and hopeful optimism of earlier YA cli-fi novels (Cerqueira 2024, 29). By exploring “the broader emotional impact of environmental change” and the specific emotional toll that originates from “displacement and ecological catastrophe” (Rahamath and Kumar 2025, 3031), Greengrass’ work closely connects the characters with their changing surroundings, revealing “how psychological devastation often parallels natural destruction” (3031).

The novel “is about two young children who have to leave behind everything they knew after losing their parents” (3035) to find shelter in their family’s home “which is far away and provides both safety and confinement as they try to find their way in a world that is no longer welcoming” (3035) because of “catastrophic sea-level rise, flooding and storms” (Bartosch and Hoydis 2025, 4). Furthermore, the narrative investigates the survival of these two siblings, Caro and Pauly, alongside a pair of caretakers – the young Sally and her grandfather Grandy, presenting the reader with a multigenerational, non-biological family unit; and, it portrays a recognizable and near-future British coastline increasingly succumbing to sea level rise, while analyzing and showing “the many losses – geographic, personal, cultural – that inevitably ensue” (Carlill 2024, 6) from the catastrophe.

Crucially, the novel observes a shift from the ‘action-oriented’ dystopia of *The City of Ember* to the genre of *climate realism* or of the *everyday Anthropocene* previously seen in Chapter Two. This genre relegates the spectacular disasters to the background and focuses instead on “foregrounding routines and resilience in the realist description of the [presented] scenario” (Bartosch and Hoydis 2025, 4). While in DuPrau’s story the collapse is a mechanical threat and the solution is a physical escape from it, in Greengrass’ novel the danger is represented by the unstoppable, pervasive rise of water, which confines the protagonists in a closed space. Consequently, if *Ember* stimulates critical thinking regarding infrastructures, *The High House* examines the emotional dimension of this thesis’s research question: how YAD cli-fi narratives cultivate environmental awareness and ecological imagination in young readers. Here, there is no ‘hero’s journey’, no ‘Egress’ to discover, no puzzle of clues to solve, and no villain to defeat. Since the protagonists have no power to fix the climate, they can only witness it. This narrative thus provides the reader with the space needed to process ecological grief and feelings of helplessness. The surviving protagonists – Caro, Pauly, Sally and Grandy – remain trapped in “an affective impasse” (Carlill 2024, 2) generated by the crisis. They do not have a broken generator or a political enemy to face; instead, they are consumed by an emotional paralysis and an “ecological grief which curdles, at times, into depression” (2). This shift, from actively doing and solving to passively enduring and inhabiting the crisis, leads the reader to acknowledge the importance of ecological imagination. This skill is particularly vital for citizens living in threatened coastal areas, helping them move beyond denial and become aware of the slow violence of their changing environment. In fact, Greengrass’ narrative structure mirrors Rob Nixon’s (2011, 2) concept of *slow violence*, portraying a catastrophe that is “neither spectacular nor instantaneous”, but rather incremental. In this way, the author perfectly captures this gradual and almost imperceptible accumulation of ecological damages (Lahtinen and Löytty 2024, 83) through Caro’s observation, when looking at the destruction that her world suffered: “Things happen slowly, and then all at once” (Greengrass 2021, 78).

Unlike the infrastructural collapse of *Ember*, which takes place in a man-made underground world, the nemesis here is a creeping tide that intrudes within the comfortable borders of the “Anthropocene Ordinarity” (Fredriksen 2025, 490). By adopting the concept of the uncanny, Greengrass juxtaposes the domestic banalities with planetary extinction, making the familiar become strange. Thus, the catastrophe is no longer a speculated future, but a certainty that permeates daily domestic routines while the world ends outside the window. This juxtaposition creates a deep sense of helplessness:

People had nowhere to go. Some of them were sitting on roofs, making videos of the water rising. Some of them were waiting to die. [...] But I didn't know how to say what I was thinking. All morning, between the rising spirits brought on by our own escape and the sudden blue skies, an end to rain after weeks of storms, a sense of desolation had come over me in waves (Greengrass 2021, 78).

Moreover, in this novel water stands as the primary agent of change. In *Ember*, the boundaries were solid walls of rock; conversely, in Greengrass' novel they are liquid and constantly eroding. The fluidity and unpredictability of water contribute to the emotional paralysis of the characters, as the ground beneath their feet becomes unreliable.

Furthermore, the narration establishes a precise geography of privilege, "a form of emotional cartography [that maps] how the devastation caused by natural disasters is rewritten into new narratives of societal and individual identities" (Rahamath and Kumar 2025, 3032). The nominal 'high house' represents an experiment of material resilience (3035) that tries to replace technological dependence with Grandy's 'caring for the soil'. It is not merely a residence defined by its location, but a fortified island of safety situated on a hill, physically elevated above the submerged villages downhill. This altitude creates a physical divide that signals the disparity between who owns the means to 'stay dry' and those who, without resources, stay below and become environmental refugees (Greengrass, 10).

In her novel, Greengrass confronts the reader with the long-term psychological consequences that safety requires during such crises (Rahamath and Kumar 2025, 3031). Caro suffers from survivor's guilt, paralyzed by the awareness that her and her brother's survival is not based on merit, but on inheritance and foresight unavailable to others; thus, she "could only see how gross the injustice was – us in the high house, dry, while all across the country people waited in the rain" (Greengrass 2021, 198). Ultimately, *The High House* reveals the moral complexities of surviving in a dying world by portraying the climate crisis not as a battle to win, but as a condition to endure, also by questioning popular discourses about the limits of altruism and "the normative choice to bring children into such a world in the first place" (Bartosch and Hoydis 2025, 4).

4.2.2) *The High House* as a Metaphor of Survival and as a Critic to Privileged Isolation

The residence prepared by the environmental scientist Francesca functions as more than a mere shelter; it serves as a modern Noah's Ark, depicting the preparedness of the wealthy Global North in times of crisis. However, unlike the biblical ark intended to save biodiversity, this structure has been designed for the survival of a small selected group of privileged people. Sally realizes this instrumentalization when examining Francesca's legal papers:

I turned over paper after paper and the truth [...] was now made obvious. This was what Francesca had intended all along. She had built the high house for Pauly, not for herself. It was a sanctuary, and Grandy and I were in the fabric of it, like the generator or the well, the barn, the boxes of seeds and the compost bins a way of ensuring the safety of her son (Greengrass 2021, 158).

The house is equipped with permaculture systems and mills to use water to generate electricity, representing the optimist intention that technological solutions can contain environmental degradation. Yet, despite Francesca's foresight to create a generator designed to last two centuries – mirroring the Builder's logic in *The City of Ember*, the narration demonstrates that it is impossible to live in isolation indefinitely while the world turns into an ocean (Greengrass 2021). The novel constantly challenges and lays bare the structural and ethical limits of this choice, revealing the gap between theoretical planning and the harsh reality of survival:

She took us to the vegetable garden, and then the well, the composting toilets, the wash house with its wood-fired boiler which we hardly used, after the first winter, when we decided that grime was inevitable and certainly better than expending the energy necessary to wash. Perhaps even Francesca couldn't imagine how tight the economy might be, between food and effort (Greengrass 2021, 140).

Although the house is presented as self-sustaining, it ultimately remains a gilded cage reliant on a finite stock prepared in the past – “the rows and rows of tins lined up on shelves, the boxed-up clothes, the medical supplies” (104) – all destined to eventually run out. Thus, this self-sufficiency is revealed to be an illusion. Even Francesca is aware and admits in her notes that “real self-sufficiency is an impossible goal [that requires] some kind of broader

community” (113). The novel illustrates that no one is truly isolated; and that survival in the high house is paradoxically still dependent on the ruins of a collapsed system:

We are not self-sufficient. There is no such thing. We rely on the stores we have left in the barn. We rely on the chickens, but the flock is shrinking. We rely on wheat, but one bad year and we will have none left to sow as seed. We rely on the tide pool and the generator which we cannot fix if it breaks. We rely on the high house, on its fabric, on its shelter and protection, but these things will not last forever. We rely on one another (Greengrass 2021, 194 in Carlill 2024, 18).

Caro’s repetition of “we rely” reflects her awareness of being in a privileged position, but also of the “impassivity and vulnerable fragility” (Carlill 2024, 19) that stems from their isolation. This fragility is a direct consequence of her and her community’s previous inaction and denial: “We saw that the situation was bad, elsewhere, but surely things would work out, because didn’t it always, for us?” (Greengrass 2021, 115 in Carlill 2021, 18). Through this type of passages, Greengrass – taking from Michael Foucault’s *homo entrepreneur’s* “technology of the self” (Binkley and Capetillo-Ponce 2009, 8) – uses her text to strongly criticize the neoliberal individualist ideology, according to which one can save oneself through the accumulation of private resources without accounting for the collapse of the entire ecosystem (Carlill 2024, 5). For the protagonists, the illusion crumbles when they realize that their survival is tied to invisible connections with infrastructures and communities that are no longer in place, turning their existence into a slow wait for the end.

4.3) *Wilder Girls*

4.3.1) The Eco-Gothic Landscape and The Monstrous-Feminine

In the novels analyzed in this chapter, “the environments [...] are often menacing and harmful” (Cerqueira 2024, 29). However, there is a crucial distinction in how this menace manifests. In *The High House: A Novel* and *The City of Ember* nature is portrayed as an external force that besieges humanity, and collapse is centered on failing infrastructure or rising water. In *Wilder Girls*, nature becomes a predatory and active agent that breaches the only lasting boundary of the skin; connecting with the theory of Alice Curry according to

which environmental crisis lead to an *embodiment's crisis* that entangles the body “with the harmful, decaying environment, [...] leading to transgressions of bodily boundaries” (29-30). Thus, ecological collapse here turns internal and biological, transforming the protagonists’ bodies from the inside out, and closely intertwining them with the environment to construct “new forms of being” (30).

Rory Power’s novel, published for the first time in 2019, is set on Raxter, an island off the coast of Maine, where the private institute of the Raxter School for Girls is located. Following “humanity’s out-of-control actions against nature” (30) that caused global temperatures to rise, a prehistoric pathogen is released from the melting ice of the Arctic. This agent, known as the Tox, starts to rapidly spread, seizing every living being on the island (30) and causing violent, deadly flare-ups that “cycle in seasons, each one worse than before” (Power 2019, 15): “But girls kept dropping. Flare-ups, which left their bodies too wrecked to keep breathing, left wounds that wouldn’t heal, or sometimes, a violence like a fever, turning girls against themselves” (13). The girls themselves witness these flare-ups and changes with concern. The reader learns about this when Hetty describes Byatt’s most recent accident and subsequent changes:

She doesn’t look any different - just a sore throat and that serrated ridge of bone down her back, bits of it peeking through her skin – but I remember every second of it. How she bled through our old mattress until it dripped onto the floorboards beneath our bunk. How she looked more confused than anything as the skin over her spine split open (13).

As the Tox takes hold, Raxter island and the local woods shift from a lifeless background to hostile actors. Hetty, the novel’s main character, describes them as monstrous, savage and predatory places permeated with darkness and fear: “The woods are bad enough – I’d swear they want us for their own” (43). Consequently, the novel can be analyzed through an *Eco-Gothic* lens, as it adopts many of the genre's typical tropes, such as: madness, darkness, disease, isolation, fear and monstrosity within an environmental setting (Cerqueira 2024, 32). Nature is “represented as a Gothic site” (30) characterized by an “eerie, mysterious and looming” vibe (30); it becomes here a vindictive force that is capable of turning the familiar into the uncanny. This representation aligns with the “plant horror” analysis of Dawn Keetley (2016, 1) according to which, nature turns terrifying when it displays an “absolute otherness” that is nonetheless shockingly alive. In *Wilder Girls*, the natural landscape

embodies Keetley's thesis that plants threaten human sovereignty because they possess a vigorous and indifferent agency that usually goes unrecognized (1). The novel anthropomorphize the natural world and gives it agency; Hetty says that she "can hear the woods growing and moving" (Power 2019, 60 in Cerqueira 2024, 33), exacerbating the "sense of terror [that] the forest already produces as a Gothic setting" (33). Moreover, the walls surrounding the school premises and the building itself are constantly violated by the trees that "stretch[...] through the fence like they're reaching for" (Power 2019, 43) the girls. The vegetation becomes a thick filter for the sun, turning the forest into a phantasmagorical setting where "everything feels forgotten, like we're the first people here in a hundred years. [...] We shouldn't be here. This place isn't ours anymore" (Power 2025, 59 in Cerqueira 2024, 32-33). Here, the "alien" (Keetley 2016, 7) vegetation, with its "absolute strangeness and [...] uncanny likeness" (5) ignores human boundaries, minimizing the protagonists' claim to space and highlighting the precariousness of their existence.

Moreover, *Wilder Girls* associate the island with the past, making it "a consuming threat, and [...] a site of the human unconscious" (Cerqueira 2024, 33). Raxter Institute is haunted by the past, whether it is in the old classrooms or in the traumatic scars that the girls now have to carry; and, the Tox itself is "a memento of the haunting past" that marks both spaces and bodies (33). Blazan suggests that past and present are connected "through histories and stories brought back by an active nature" (33); and, this could be seen in Power novel's disease induced by climate change. The parasite-ghost "returns to haunt the human being" that has acted against nature (33).

Through the Eco-Gothic lens, the novel explores the dissolution of the complicated relationship between humans and nature (31). The landscape literally devours bodies; thus, it turns into a setting where the imagined threat of being "eaten" by monsters becomes reality. The tox has also transformed Raxter's animals – it got "inside them like it got inside us, [...] pushing their bones through their skiing, [...] stretching their bodies until they screamed" (Power 2019, 18) noted the girl. Now, the island's fauna turns wild and grows strange: coyotes have become "bigger than wolves" (Cerqueira 2024, 43) and deers develop "incisors long and gleaming wet, sharp like a coyote's" (Power 2019, 126); signaling that biological collapse has mutated the entire evolutionary chain. Within this setting, nature is no longer an idyll to preserve, but a "formal turbulence, a living thing" (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996, 108) that permeates both body and spirit. Transformed by the Tox, nature now "flourishes wildly, reclaiming the space that was once its own" (Cerqueira 2024, 32).

Furthermore, this ecological reclamation specifically targets adolescent female bodies,

engaging with the trope of the “Monstrous-Feminine” (Creed 1993), a literary tradition that challenges the patriarchal view of women as victims “by arguing that the prototype of all definitions of the monstrous is the female reproductive body” (2). Rory Power uses, in her novel, the uncanny and the monstrous to conduct a deeper discourse about female existence – with all its sufferings and challenges. She narrates about complicated female friendship dynamics, portrays what it is like growing up as a girl and being an adolescent, and she vividly describes how it feels to see your body mutate. In alignment with the perspective of Rachel Eve Moulton, who argues that our bodies constitute a horror show (621), Raxter’s girls exhibit every type of unimaginable, horrific mutation, which are viscerally described throughout the story: “[we are] sick and strange, and we don’t know why. Things bursting out of us, bits missing, and pieces sloughing off, and then we harden and smooth over” (Power 2019, 2-3). Rapoport’s (2020, 626) suggests that this description could easily apply to “any normal teenager’s adolescent years, especially those that menstruate”; however, in the context of the Tox, the transformation is rendered far more unnatural and horrific, especially when considering that due to these changes the girls were experimented upon. Consequently, their monstrosity does not only open a discourse about empowerment and resilience, but presents also the reality of the woman as a victim, “an object traditionally subjugated, both for its presumed weakness and its presumed threat” (622).

The examination of “selfhood and the Other in relation to women’s physical bodies” (Rapoport 2020, 619) has become increasingly common in recent literature; and, more specifically, horror fictions, like *Wilder Girls*, offer the perfect platform “to elevate conversations surrounding woman – and selfhood, using the discomfort evoked by body horror to demystify and normalize discussions surrounding women’s bodies and their natural functions previously considered grotesque” (619). Through this subgenre, Rory Power successfully embraces and reclaims the power of female bodies. She counters the original secret narrative that made the girls compliant victims, empowering them and generally challenging the stigmas and ideologies that usually surround females (632). As Lucy Taylor (2018 in Rapoport 2020, 622) notes, “the feminine provides a wealth of possibilities for body horror: menstruation, lactation, the terrors of childbirth, even suppressed female fury against misogynistic culture”. And, within this novel, these “instances of female body horror thrive”, echoing Julia Armfield’s belief that “the female body is a nexus of pain almost by design, but it is also potentially monstrous” (622). This duality is perfectly clear in the Raxter girls: by unrecognizably amplifying their physical forms and empowering them as wild females, Power seems to confront the discomforted reader with a “let me show you how terrifying

women's bodies can be" (623), potentially "make[ing] readers so uncomfortable that they find themselves longing for tame descriptions of sexual discovery or something as mundane as first periods" (626).

4.3.2) The Biopolitics of the Tox: Institutional Failure and Post-Human Survival

This section shifts the analysis to the internal nature of the crisis, viewing the Tox not simply as a pathogen, but as a catalyst of a post-human reconfiguration that exposes the failure of institutional containment structures. In the narrative, the Tox stops being a mere disease and turns into an entity with agency that dictates a new, violent evolution. Described by Power (2019, 50-51 in Cerqueira 2024, 33) as "unbridled and vicious and free", "wild ... blossoming and spreading with a kind of joy", the virus does not merely inhabit the girls' bodies but claims it entirely – "making us their own" (Power 2019, 340). Its defining characteristic is unpredictability; rather than attacking the host solely to destroy it, the Tox seeks to re-write it in a unique way for each individual.

Once being attacked, the relationship between the host and the parasite evolves into a forced symbiotic relationship where both entities are required to survive (Cerqueira 2024, 34). The resulting bodily mutations – such as "gills, a taloned hand, two heartbeats, a third, closed eyelid; and a serrated ridge of bone down the back" (30) – are not random deformities, but biological trials for adaptation to an environment that has turned hostile. As Hetty realizes, the Tox has been trying to metamorphose humans to make them survive the new harsh environment created by man-made climate change (36): "[The Tox] models us after the animals around us, tries to change our bodies, push them further than they're willing to go. Like it's trying to make us better, if only we could adapt" (Power, 2019, 169). Consequently, the transformed body becomes "a site of uncanny feelings" (Cerqueira 2024, 34). The girls live the horror of "an experience of otherness with sameness", also known as *unheimlich* (Beal 2002, 5 in Cerqueira 2025, 35), as their familiar forms are de-familiarized by the Tox. Yet, this estrangement paradoxically evolves into agency. Their mutated shapes are now "embedded with uncanny power – a power that comes from their bodies being posthuman" (35). This transformation embodies the "ontology of *Being-a-Body*" (Marchesini 2025, 1) and the concept of ontopoiesis, where the body is viewed not as a static vessel, but as a dynamic entity shaped "through continuous relational activity" (1). The Tox does not merely destroy what encounters on its path; it reorganizes somatic structures and unlocks "new

possibilities of actualization” (1), challenging the anthropocentric illusion of separation and exposing how “deeply interconnected the human body is with nature” (Cerqueira 2024, 36).

In this context, the Tox acts as a visceral manifestation of the climate crisis. It is no longer an external threat: it dissolves the boundaries between the self and the environment, operating through what Stacy Alaimo (2010b) defines as “trans-corporeality”. This concept highlights the “imbrication of human bodies not only with each other, but with non-human creatures and physical landscapes” (15) redefining the humans as permeable “material” (15). The virus represents the Earth’s response to human intervention: a biological insurrection that reclaims humans as a primary resource and, in a way, deprives them of agency. Against this force, the human containment systems – represented by the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Navy – collapse completely. The failure of these institutions is not merely technical but ethical. After a year of unsuccessful study and containment attempts on the island, the decision to abandon and ultimately bomb the site reveals a shift from medical care into control and risk management (Cerqueira 2024, 36). Applying the two theories of Mbembe’s (2019, 66) *necropolitics* – sovereignty controls mortality transforming life into “the deployment and manifestation of power” (66) – and Foucault’s (2003, 239-264 in Mbembe 2019, 66) *biopower* – “that domain of life over which power has asserted its control”, Raxter Island transforms into a space where institutions exercise the power to dictate who may live or die. This power is exercised through the selective distribution of resources, visible in the ‘filtered’ deliveries of food. The Navy ceases every pretense of being a provider of care and reveals its nature of border force, policing the line between what is legally human and what is considered “infected material” (Power 2019, 214). Consequently, upon the arrival of the infection, Raxter school immediately loses its educational function, morphing into a ‘penitentiary-laboratory’ where the girls, reduced to subjects to be contained and studied, organize a new social structure based on the physical ability to perform “Gun Shifts” and “Boat shifts” (Power 2019, 9-16). The Navy promises them a cure, using it as a control mechanism to mask the reality of their abandonment. However, this false narrative is soon exposed and, in the absence of a valid adult guiding figure, the girls realize that, in order to survive their new monstrous and predatory environment, they need to become predators themselves.

Subsequently, resilience in *Wilder Girls* is not found in the hope of returning to normality, but in the acceptance of monstrosity. Hetty recognizes that waiting for outside rescue is a death sentence. True survivalism begins when the protagonists cease looking for a cure and decide to become wilder. This shift is epitomized by Byatt, who finds “strength in

her posthuman body” (Cerqueira 2024, 38). By refusing the idea of a cure, she embraces her mutation: “I think I’d been looking for it all my life – a storm in my body to match the one in my head” (Power 2019, 179). In a world where technological and social infrastructures have crumbled, the mutated body becomes the only viable infrastructure. Resilience, therefore, lies in the capability to embrace this metamorphosis, eroding the limits between self and nature, and transforming biological pain into an instrument of post-human autonomy.

Ultimately, Rory Power’s novel contributes to the ecopedagogical goal of this thesis through its radical dismantling of anthropocentrism. By presenting the human body as adaptable and permeable, the narrative urges the reader to inhabit a position of deep, uncomfortable entanglement with the environment, abandoning the illusion of being separated from it. Consequently, the text functions as a pedagogical simulation of ‘contaminated survival’ where resilience emerges from embracing biological hybridity. By accepting that survival in a collapsing world necessitates building a symbiotic relationship with the ‘monstrous’ nature, rather than an attempt to control it, a shift in perspective is attained: the reader can fully gain ecological awareness, while cultivating a ‘post-human ethic’ – the ability to recognize oneself as part of a monstrous, “multispecies assemblage[...]” (Haraway 2015, 160 in Schneider-Mayerson 2017, 317) where survival completely abandons the idea of domination, to embrace radical adaptation.

5) Intergenerational Responsibility, Agency and Temporalities Within the Anthropocene

The previous chapter has focused on the phenomenology of ecological collapse, describing territories affected by the slow violence of unstoppable high tides, dying cities, and toxic organisms. To complete this analysis, Chapter five shifts the attention of the reader from the location of the catastrophe to its actors. As established, the environment is more than a passive backdrop: it is an active force that shapes the ontological status and the subject's psyche. Hence, this chapter conducts an analysis focused on the actors performing on the metaphorical 'stage' of collapse, investigating how the climate crisis acts as a catalyst for a radical reconfiguration of human identity and the intergenerational social contract. Consequently, this morphed, threatening environment makes it impossible to sustain traditional hierarchies of care, leading to one of the major breaking points analyzed in these pages: the crisis of the "Generational Order" (Alanen 2009, 159). Traditionally, the social structure is based on the assumption that older generations act as protectors, guaranteeing their offspring a safe environment where to grow up. However, climate fiction narratives expose how the Anthropocene has generated the greatest "intergenerational injustice" (Meyer 2017) in history: youth's inheritance is now a planet damaged by decisions made long before they were born.

In the three novels analyzed in Chapter Four, the reader witnesses the systemic failing of the adult world and different modes of reaction to them. Parents and institutions cease to provide protection, often becoming the direct culprits of the danger or turning into figures paralyzed by political and affective inertia (Carlill 2024). This leads to the phenomenon known as "parentification" (Spencer and Craig 2024, 12), forcing young protagonists to grow up "virtually overnight" (Cart 2022 3) and taking on their shoulders practical and emotional responsibilities abandoned them by adults. In this context, minors are no longer 'only kids' to be protected, rather they transform into 'future holders' – the sole owners of a future that they must rip from their predecessors' "rotting past" (Butler 1993, 68 in Williams 2023, 23). This transformation marks a definitive turning point: the shift from the literary trope of *youth as utopia* (Edelman 2004, 3) to the necessity of *youth as resilience* (Spencer and Craig 2024, 12), reflecting young reader's deep trauma of the Anthropocene.

The concept of agency is closely connected with this shift; thus, it must be radically redefined. The reader is no longer presented with the classical narrative of the hero capable of

resolving the lost order – an impossible objective in a world that has gone beyond the tipping point. Instead, post-apocalyptic agency manifests as an “ecological citizenship” (Wolf et al. 2009), which is connected with the concept of “situated knowledge” (Haraway 1988). This *situated ecological citizenship* is divided into three main modes – investigative agency, agency of stewardship, and symbiotic agency – aimed at representing distinct strategies to inhabit the ruins: by making the invisible visible, by maintaining affective connections through care, or by accepting biological transformation.

Finally, living within the Anthropocene also means inhabiting new time perceptions. The climate crisis breaks the circular time of seasons and the stability of nature, dragging subjects into what Lauren Berlant defines as “Climate Crisis Ordinarity” (Carlill 2024, 1). The protagonists are trapped in a “stretched-out present” (5), an affective impasse where the future has already slipped into the present (2). While elders remain tied to a historical memory that threatens to become a burden, the youth must learn how to navigate the “future anterior” (6), imagining a world that does not yet exist but is already written in the current ruins.

5.1) Dismantling the Romantic Childhood

This section explores the transformation of the concept of youth, defining the YAD cli-fi protagonists not merely as survivors, but as ‘unwilling heirs’ of a damaged planet. This definition resonates with what Jacques Derrida describes as the ‘injunction of inheritance’ (1994), according to which being is an inheritance that compels “to speak of the ghost, indeed to the ghost and with it” (xviii). Within the context of the Anthropocene, these ‘ghosts’ represent the spectral presence of the errors made in the past. Consequently, the young protagonists of the analyzed novels are forced to engage with their haunting ghosts – failing systems, climate catastrophes, toxic legacies – mourning a world that some of them, like in the case of Pauly, never even knew or remembered, and managing a destroyed legacy that they did not intentionally choose for themselves.

Modern Young Adult literature constitutes a definitive breaking point from Rousseau’s ideal of infancy, traditionally viewed as a ‘golden age’ protected from and separated by the turbulence of the adult world (Khan 2020, 11-12). If the ‘Romantic Child’ appears as a pure figure, existing close to an idyllic nature (11), the ‘Anthropocene child’ is a subject exposed and intrinsically linked (Dror 2010, 8) to a nature that is “no longer [...]

idyll and static” (Khan 2020, 12), but is also seen as the “key [to maintain] legacy and hope for the future” (12). This transition is not uniform across the selected novels; rather, it manifests through contrasting archetypes.

In *The High House*, Pauly embodies the “vulnerable child” (12) of this transition, described as “defenseless and in need of management” (12). Lacking any memories of the world before its collapse (Bartosch and Hoydis 2025, 5), his infancy is intrinsically tied to the ruin, yet he remains sheltered by the adult’s protection. This reflects Lee Edelman’s observation that “the future is marked by the child in peril [...] in a moment where [the future itself] is in peril” (Khan 2020, 12). However, climate fiction narratives enact a radical transformation of this role. Children are no longer mere symbols of a frail future that must be preserved in accordance with Edelman’s “reproductive futurism” (Edelman 2004, 11 in Power N. 2009, 2) – a concept that projects the meaning of life toward the construction of a better future for the younger generations, using the Child as a political symbol to negate the present and marginalize those unable to reproduce (Edelman 2004, 3). Instead, they become the material holders of collective survival in the present time. In contrast to the vulnerable child embodied by Pauly, this transformation could be found in Hetty in *Wilder Girls*, who represents the brutal actualization of the Anthropocene child. She has not been sheltered from nature, but rather invaded by it. While Pauly receives protection from the storm, Hetty’s body becomes the storm itself through the Tox, blurring the boundaries between the human body and the wild environment.

The environmental and social collapse acts as an evolutionary accelerator. While society traditionally expects children to transition into adulthood gradually, the climate crisis forces them to grow up “virtually overnight” (Cart 2022, 3) due to the sheer necessity of survival. This forced maturation aligns with the concept of the “parentified child”, introduced by Salvador Minuchin in 1967 (Spencer and Craig 2024, 12), a phenomenon which occurs when the youth must assume the emotional and practical responsibilities abandoned by paralyzed or absent adults. This burden connects characters across different narratives. In *The High House*, Caro has to “[fit her] life to Pauly’s, because he needed” her, but she needs him as well, unconsciously finding a purpose to survive despite her depression. Similarly, in *The City of Ember*, Lina has to act as a mother for her toddler sister Poppy. However, there is a crucial difference between the two girls: while for Lina taking care of Poppy is a source of joy that connects her to a lost innocence, for Caro the same responsibility is a heavy anchor that prevents her from succumbing to grief, illustrating the complex psychological toll of premature adulthood. Moreover, since the vertical protection of adults – rooted in what

Donna Haraway calls the traditional “genealogical order” (2015, 161) – has collapsed, all the protagonists of the three novels are forced to forge new horizontal alliances. Whether it is the investigative partnership between Lina and Doon, the survivalist sisterhood in *Wilder Girls*, or the new intergenerational non-biological family in *The High House*, this type of care, reflecting Haraway’s concept of “making kin” (161), becomes the only reliable structure in a world that is slowly succumbing.

The young students inhabiting *The City of Ember*, at the age of twelve, are suddenly transformed by their society into working gears; as a consequence, they do not have the opportunity to become aware and curious citizens, being suppressed by a governing system that makes them unconscious pawns, necessary for the survival of a dying machine. Similarly, in *Wilder Girls*, the students of Raxter Institute are isolated and treated as test subjects by authorities. As Hetty observes, looking at the fence surrounding the Institute: “Built, too, I suppose, to keep the girls inside, on the grounds. As if there was anywhere else on this island to go” (Power 2019, 42). In this context, as authorities abdicate all institutional tutelage, protected youth is revealed to be a privilege that collapse is quickly eroding, rather than a universal right.

The young protagonists of the selected novels embody the tension of many young readers across the world – tension rooted in a cumulative history of environmental neglect that goes beyond the immediate past. Today, some of these sentiments find an outlet through participation in youth climate movements, like the so-called “Greta Generation” (Matejova and Spáč 2025): a cohort that has inherited the responsibility for a disaster that has not been caused by them. Consequently, these young people are not passive victims, but rather triggers for action. Their eco-agency is born from the necessity to navigate a world in which the intergenerational pact is broken. While some might feel more in tune with Caro’s paralysis in response to the crisis, others see themselves in characters like Doon Harrow, who has the promptness to channel this betrayal into an investigation motivated by rage. Consequently, they are compelled to rebel against the status quo, transforming into less compliant and more socially aware subjects who convert their vulnerability into a positive force. This shift is vividly captured in Greta Thunberg’s 2019 speech at the UN:

This is all wrong. [...] You are failing us. But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. [...] if you choose to fail us I say we will never forgive you. We will not let you get away with this. Right here, right now is where we draw the line. The world is waking up. And change is coming, whether you like it or not

(Thunberg 2019 in Tan 2019, 123).

This rebellion signals that, despite the many possible nuances of relationships and personal beliefs, the traditional “generational order” (Alaneen 2009, 159) – presented by Leena Alanen as a “useful tool to work on and to refine, and to develop into a comprehensive framework the social study of childhood” (161) and the social construct of adults as the protectors of the future of their children – is, broadly speaking, profoundly compromised. In *Ember*, the Builders designed an underground existence that was established to last for a limited amount of time, effectively pre-determining the sealed destiny of generations yet to be born. Similarly, in *The High House*, Francesca prepares an ark for her family, yet her scientific foresight cannot erase the guilt of leaving her children in a world deprived of basic comforts and safety.

A fundamental ontological distinction emerges from the novels regarding the family model (Khan 2020, 1): on one side lies the guilt of the middle generation; on the other, the responsibility to carry on falls entirely on the youth. However, Lina and Hetty, unlike their parents, do not have the luxury of wasting time feeling guilty; they are called to be the ‘future holders’ precisely when the future itself appears unthinkable and they only have the imperative of survival. This condition creates a sense of resentment and power that goes against the failing institutions, echoing the chorus in *The Great Immensity* by Steve Cosson: “We are young. We do not forget. We do not forgive. We are more powerful than nations. We can stop them. We can fuck up everything. We are legion” (Chaudhuri 2014, 2).

The anxiety experienced by characters such as Doon and Caro is not a mere literary trope; it reflects an ecological experience that is real for millions of readers worldwide (Lahtinen and Löytty 2024, 86). While these narratives “show how to be persistent and do what’s right” (Rahamath and Kumar 2025, 3035), they do not shy away from the trauma involved. This feeling, defined as the affective impasse of being implicated in violent systems beyond one’s control, pervades YA dystopian narratives (Carlill 2024, 1). In *The High House*, a story centered on “coping with loss and facing an unknown future” (Rahamath and Kumar 2025, 3035), Caro experiences a climatic depression that paralyzes her in a “freeze response” (3036), reflecting a deep ecological grief for the loss of biodiversity and stability. This is in contrast with Doon’s active anxiety, which manifests as a restless drive to fix the generator. Yet, both reactions stem from the same realization: the adults have lost control.

However, as seen in the previous chapters, YAD climate fiction offers the reader a therapeutic space “to sit with their anxieties” (Leavenworth and Manni 2021, 730),

confronting and processing them. Young readers facing the menace of rising water levels, resources scarcity, and biodiversity loss, may find in Doon and Lina the critical curiosity that breaks the dogma, and in Caro the ability to ‘inhabit the ruins’ through everyday acts of care, despite the feelings of “terror, which [sometimes] shade into fury at its edges” (Greengrass 2021, 36). Consequently, eco-anxiety can be transformed from a debilitating burden into the engine of a new ecological citizenship, based on the strengthening of the individual’s stewardship of the biosphere “and awareness of the interrelatedness of all life” (Hung 2017, 54). Finally, deprived of romantic innocence and burdened by an unfair ecological debt, these unwilling heirs redefine human beings not as nature’s dominators, but as an integral and vulnerable part of a mutating system “in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world” (Alaimo and Hekman 2008, 238 in Tan 2019, 44).

5.1.1) Models of Ecological Agency: Investigating, Caring and Becoming

In this section, the analysis shifts from theory to praxis, exploring how the narratives of *The City of Ember*, *The High House: A Novel*, and *Wilder Girls* reveal three different forms of youthful agency and situated ecological citizenship. The cognitive, affective, and biological competencies presented here are not mere narrative responses to imagined disasters, but essential survival tools for the 21st century’s youth. They represent the evolution from the protected ‘Romantic child’ to the “integrated ecological subject [that] has taken on a new agentive role” (Khan 2020, 13) and is now capable of conducting life within the ruins.

The first model is the *investigative agency* found in *The City of Ember*, representing the cognitive resistance against systemic blindness. In DuPrau’s novel, the necessity for agency arises from a double adult failure: the historical obsolescence of the Builders and the moral corruption of Mayor Cole, who personifies the anthropocentric egoism that steals and hoards resources from the collectivity while the city collapses into darkness. Instead of protecting the local youth, the administration chains their “docile bodies” (Foucault 1977, 138 in Thompson 2020, 230) to bureaucratic jobs in order to keep an obsolete machine alive, without even fully understanding its functioning – “Can you tell me how it works? [...] Who knows? Our job is to keep it from breaking down” (DuPrau 2003, 48).

Against this enforced systemic blindness – connected to Rob Nixon’s (2011, 2) “attritional lethality” of slow violence – Lina and Doon’s agency manifests as an epistemological resilience that aligns with Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann’s concept

of “storied matter” (2014, 89). By looking at the material world as an articulate reality filled with signs to interpret, instead of considering it a mere backdrop, their agency becomes investigative and codebreaking in nature. Operating in a closed ecosystem where technological literacy has been lost, they refuse to accept blackouts as magical fatalities and reject the city’s dogma that “there is nothing out there” (DuPrau 2003, 65). Their strength lies in their critical curiosity and deep attention to details: Doon discovers the physical decay of the generator and the pipelines, while Lina reassembles the fragments of the *Instructions*. By transforming a ruined document into an idiom of material salvation, they demonstrate that substituting adults means decoding the truth and physically guiding the population toward safety.

From a pedagogical perspective, this narrative offers a blueprint for infrastructural literacy. Just as Doon visualizes the invisible nets of the pipeworks and Lina follows the colorful, tangible strings of her Granny’s memories, investigative agency helps the contemporary ecological subject visualize the visible and invisible nets that sustain their habitat. Consequently, drawing on Thompson’s interpretation of Foucault’s idea of control (2000, 233), this type of agency is a refutation of the technological illiteracy that makes masses vulnerable to authoritarian manipulation.

While Ember focuses on the macro-systems, *The High House* illustrates the *agency of care*, intended not as a mere sentiment, but as the active work of “maintaining, continuing, or repairing the world” (Tronto 1993, 104) to keep sustaining life. The focus shifts to the micro-ethics of maintenance – “we fall into a pattern, and life is set” (Greengrass 2021, 149). Here, the narrative conflict is framed by intergenerational feelings of guilt and responsibility (Bartosch and Hoydis 2025, 5). As Sally observes:

The future had slipped into the present – and, despite the fact that we had known that it would come, the overwhelming feeling, now that it was here, was of surprise [...]. I saw what was happening, and my safety sat on me like a weight, but there was Pauly to think of, and Caro, and Grandy. We only had enough for ourselves (Greengrass 2021, 226 in Bartosch and Hoydis 2025, 5).

Francesca, the mother-scientist, is aware of having failed in saving the world; she feels guilty for having placed the “general needs of a population above the real and specific ones of her family” (Greengrass 2021, 26). While she attempts to redeem herself by making provisions and building a high-tech ‘ark’ for her children (Bartosch and Hoydis 2025, 4), the true agency

belongs to the youth – Caro, Pauly and Sally – who do not try to escape the catastrophe but choose to inhabit it, living “in that space between two futures, fitting our whole lives into the gap between fear and certainty” (Greengrass 2021, 19).

Caro incarnates the extreme consequences of “parentification” (Spencer and Craig 2024, 12), managing ecological grief while shouldering the practical load of survival. However, this resilience is not solitary; it manifests as reciprocal stewardship. Sally takes care of her grandfather Grandy – who represents a nature that has become old, tired, fragile and incapable of self-protecting: “Grandy could no longer manage by himself. His hip healed but he was left with stiffness, pain, a limp” (Greengrass 2021, 122) – demonstrating that rebuilding the social contract requires the preservation of affective bonds, not just violence or resources. This model redefines resilience as the ability to live within ruins. Whether fixing the house, growing food, tending to the birds, or monitoring the resources, the act of caring becomes a form of resistance against emotional paralysis (Carlill 2024). It represents the capacity to make a place feel like home within a broken world, transforming eco-anxiety into day-to-day restorative actions that help keep human dignity through responsibility toward the realistic limit of the immediate community, in the hope of slowly “widening” (Short, Ensweiler, and Misisaszek 2025) to the global.

Finally, *Wilder Girls* presents the most radical type of evolution: a *symbiotic agency*, which is connected with the concepts of “multispecies assemblages” (Haraway 2015, 160 in Schneider-Mayerson 2017, 317) and “making kin” (Haraway 2015). Rory Power depicts for the reader the brutal breach of the social contract through the concept of necropolitics, seen in the previous chapter. Here, adults – represented by the Institute Headmistress, the Navy, and the CDC – transform the girls into test subjects to be sacrificed for the ‘greater good’, promising a cure that is revealed to be an institutional lie to maintain order. However, on Raxter Island, the crisis is not only external but internal as well. The Tox’s porosity, by invading the bodies, destroys human integrity, melting it together with natural elements (Tan 2019, 44). Hetty and her friends experience the horror of “trans-corporeality” (Alaimo 2010b), seeing nature becoming one with them, inside their own bodies (Tan 2019, 44).

Consequently, symbiotic agency emerges when Hetty stops looking for an external cure from the corrupted adult world and accepts her transformation as the only possible way to survive. This represents the surpassing of anthropocentrism: the body is not a sacred temple, but a permeable ecosystem that must adapt to a new toxic biosphere. The survival of the Raxter girls turns wild: it refutes the civilized identity imposed by adults to turn into something new, capable of breathing in the toxic environment created by their predecessors.

The youthful agency gains a physical, brutal, and relational form in answer to the adult's betrayal. Abandoned by them, Raxter's girls – echoing Donna Haraway's concept of “making kin” (2015) – create an elective form of kinship based on the necessity to survive in a predatory ecosystem. They act as a “legion” (Chaudhuri 2014, 2) that protects its own bodies and immediate connections rather than abstract ideals, and that does not forgive the systemic betrayal.

In the wake of global pandemics like COVID-19, this type of agency is fundamental for teenagers. It teaches that we are all biologically connected with viruses and pollutants. Consequently, survival requires the ability to co-habit with the monstrous – irreversible biological changes, to build new forms of solidarity that take the place of failing hierarchies, and to accept one's role as part of “multispecies assemblages” (Schneider-Mayerson 2017, 317) that continuously evolve.

5.2) The Failure of Adulthood

Having defined the young protagonists as involuntary heirs of a crumbling planet, it is necessary to shift the analysis to the adults. This cohort, which might be called the ‘middle generation’, stands between the adaptive urgency of the youth and the ‘ancestral wisdom’ of the elders. They inhabit the metaphorical ‘stage of collapse’ not as victims, but as its architects: they decided to prioritize “industry and economics over family and the environment” (Khan 2020, 7) and are now paying the consequences of their choices. If the previous chapter explored the ontology of the youth exposed to this collapse, this section focuses on the rupture of the social contract between adults and their children. Consequently, the conflict that ensues cannot be reduced to simple adolescent rebellion driven by behavioural differences and family dynamics (6); rather, it constitutes a true intergenerational betrayal.

The connection between generations has been compromised by decisions made before the birth of the young protagonists, creating what Octavia Butler defines as a “rotting past” (1993, 68 in Williams 2023, 23) that consumes every possibility of a future. In this context, adulthood does not represent a maturity milestone or a safe guide, but becomes both an ethical and operational state of failure (Khan 2020, 9). Traditionally, adults are expected to act as a ‘shield’ between the child and danger, “safeguard[ing] the continued propagation of the human species” (13), and handling global complexities to preserve the innocence of

youth. However, in Anthropocene narratives, their mission has changed crucially: adults cease to be protectors to become dangerous themselves, acting as the very trigger of collapse (12-13).

Fundamentally, adult figures are generally expected to be safe shelters where children can find refuge; however, from the contexts of the selected novels it emerges that they have stopped to be these protective figures, and have instead transformed into material and psychological obstacles to the youth's survival. Within the Anthropocene, adults have broken the global ecosystem's cycle not because of biological necessity, but through social organizations destined to conquer nature. As Glotfelty and Fromm (1996, 115-116) observe, "because the global ecosystem is a connected whole, in which nothing can be gained or lost and which is not subject to overall improvement, anything extracted from it by human effort must be replaced. Payment of this price cannot be avoided". Now, the payment of this price is due, but it is too late: civility itself is negatively marked and "the present environmental crisis is a warning that we have delayed nearly too long" (116).

The failure of the middle generation can be categorized into two main groups, both equally lethal for the survival of youth. The first group consists of the *exploiters*: authoritative figures who use disasters to consolidate their personal power or maintain the status quo, such as Mayor Cole in *The City of Ember* and *Wilder Girl's* Headmistress. This type of adult embodies the slow violence typical of predatory systems, treating youth as disposable resources. The second group is represented by *passive adults*, characterized by political inertia, psychological denial or affective paralysis (Carlill 2024, 1). Like Doon's father in *The City of Ember*, this type of individuals have become so used to the crisis that, in accordance with Kari Marie Norgaard's concept of (2011, 9) "socially organized denial", they "tune it out like static" (Greengrass 2021, 2). The climate crisis ordinariness of these characters brings them to a position of political quiescence that equals an indirect participation in the ongoing ecocide (Carlill 2024, 2). And, whether through active exploitation or passive denial, these 'architects of collapse' force the young protagonists into a pattern of "parentification" (Spencer and Craig 2024, 12) that forces children to shoulder moral and practical responsibilities.

5.2.1) The Two Faces of Guardianship: Necropolitics and Abandonment

In this section, the research moves to analyzing how the failure of the intergenerational contract manifests through two opposite, yet equally destructive, modalities: the exercise of a predatory power and the paralyzing apathy. While romantic literature depicts the adult as a protective shield (Khan 2020, 12), Anthropocene narratives reveal a reality where tutelage transforms into necropolitics (Fredriksen 2025, 496) or systemic abandonment (Khan 2020, 12).

Achille Mbembe's (2019) concept of necropolitics, represents the most extreme form of intergenerational betrayal in the selected YAD cli-fi novels. In this framework, sovereign power is no longer concerned with the wellbeing of the population, but rather with deciding "who may live and who must die" (Khan 2020, 12). Children are viewed neither as citizens to be protected nor as the future of the human species, but as a disposable biomass or simply as a workforce required to sustain the present of the adults.

In *The City of Ember*, the corruption of adult leadership manifests as a lethal form of political parasitism, embodied by Mayor Cole. His physical appearance – he is described as a heavy mass with a "gray, drooping face [which] appeared to be made of something stiffer than ordinary skin" (DuPrau 2003, 7) – figuratively reflects the internal corruption of Ember's system. While the underground city faces an energetic collapse, Cole handles the crisis through an 'honorable lie', exercising necropolitical power to extend his biological existence by parasitizing the community's life-support system. He comforts the citizens with false promises of solutions while having no intention of fixing the dying generator.

The climax of his betrayal is discovered by Doon and Lina in *room 351*, hidden within the pipeworks, where the Mayor has stored an immense treasure of stolen resources: "food, clothes, boxes, cans. Lightbulbs[...]. piles and piles up to the ceiling" (128). As noted by Clary Laine, Ember's greenhouse manager, his hunger is not only physical, but systemic as well: "It's like a hungry creature. It wants and wants and wants with a terrible power. And the more you give it, the bigger and hungrier it gets" (136). Cole's systemic "short-terminism" (Büscher and Fletcher 2020, 69), which exposes Ember's population to the lethal drift of future blindness, exemplifies Stephen Gardiner's "tyranny of the contemporary" (2011), prioritizing the immediate gratification over the long-term survival of the collective. He effectively cannibalizes the future of the city to sustain his parasitic present existence, showing how, in a collapsing world, authority's refusal to look forward is a weapon of mass destruction (Gardiner 2011, 153-154).

If Mayor Cole represents individual corruption, *Wilder Girls* explores the failure of state and scientific institutions. Here, necropolitics hides behind the mask of health protocols.

The Headmistress of Raxter Institute mirrors Mayor Cole: initially appears to be a strict guardian, she is later revealed to be “hoarding supplies” (Power R. 2019, 200) while students starve to death. Her treason runs deep; knowing that the food delivered from the continent is contaminated – “All sorts of bad things in there. Expired products. Pesticides” (49) – she still keeps the illusion of protection to avoid panic.

Crucially, the Girls are not treated as patients to be cured, but as “lab rats” (Al-Khafaji and Yaroub 2019, 195); their survival is tolerated only as long as they can provide useful data. The Headmistress knew from years prior that “something was wrong, before the Tox started” (202) and she decided to keep the girls on the island anyway. Consequently, the girls discover the most terrible truth of the Anthropocene’s necropolitics: for the State and their own relatives, they are “already dead” (202). When the price of research becomes too expensive and the risk of the virus escaping outweighs their value, the authorities – with the complicity of the Headmistress – decide to close the experiment by opting for mass euthanasia via lethal gas, framing this act as a “more humane” (205) gesture. Once again invoking Gardiner’s “tyranny of the contemporary” (2011), the adult becomes the supreme predator, and the biological and affective connection is severed in the name of a global utilitarian calculation.

However, if the first face of adult failure is predatory necropolitics, the second is subtler, but perhaps more tragic: helplessness. These adults are not moved by wickedness, but by obsolescence: they mentally belong to a pre-collapse reality and try to apply rational, scientific and social logics to a present that is already slipped into chaos (Bartosch and Hoydis 2025, 4-5). This affective impasse is described as an inability to act that is born from remaining stuck within thinking structures that have no longer a hold of reality (Carlill 2024, 7).

In *The High House*, Francesca embodies the archetype of the competent planner who has the intellectual ability to anticipate disaster, but lacks the political or biological strength to stop it. She dedicates her final years transforming her family’s house into a self-sufficient shelter (Bartosch and Hoydis 2025, 4). Thus, her response to the crisis is purely material: she stores resources, installs a long term generator supplied by a mill, and accumulates seeds. Yet, Francesca is an ambivalent figure that “embodies the weight of witnessing the catastrophe” (Rahamath and Kumar 2025, 3035), representing a ‘glimmering hope’ that at the same time is paradoxically absent in her role as a mother. Despite her scientific precision, she dies during a storm in Florida, leaving a defective heredity: a fortified house, but an absolute emotional void. Her death forces Caro and Pauly into immediate parentification, requiring

them to become guardians of a world that they do not fully understand, and to handle complex infrastructures without the guide of who projected them (3037).

A different form of helplessness is presented in *The City of Ember* through Loris Harrow, Doon's father. Loris represents the 'silent majority': a kind man who deeply loves his son but has accepted the city's decline as an inevitable destiny. However, to see injustice without revolting is the mark of a generation that has favored the stability of servitude over freedom's uncertainty (Tan 2019, 103). He manages a "Small Items shop" (DuPrau 2003, 43), a place that symbolically acts as a nostalgic museum for a past that is crumbling. While he teaches his son to always "pay attention to everything, [and to] notice what no one else notices" (46), Loris uses this skill only to survive within the dying system, and not to challenge it. The nature of his failure is ethical and civic; and, he represents the kindness that becomes an accomplice of evil through inertia (Carlill 2024, 1).

5.3) The Third Generation: Between Marginalization and Parentification

This section explores the emergence of an unexpected and strategically vital bond that resonates with what Donna Haraway's call to 'make kin' (2015), which could be defined as 'ancestral alliance'. As previously seen, many dystopian young adult cli-fi narratives portray a drastic rupture in the traditional generational order; and, while the middle generation is often paralyzed by eco-anxiety or trapped in the extractive and capitalistic logics of the "grow or die [...] mentality" (Tan 2019, 7), a solidarity axis forms between the first generation and the third. However, it is important to note that, in our current reality, this rupture and rearrangement of ties is not always as clear-cut as it is presented within literary texts.

This alliance is not casual, but grows from a shared condition of socio-economic marginalization. According to the neoliberal logic – which is "roughly based on a competitive spirit which values the strong one and the one who oppress" (92), both these groups are positioned outside the capitalistic production and consumption cycle (105): the youth are not yet productive, while elders are no longer producing. However, precisely this exclusion allows them to bypass today's frenetic pace and the obsession for the coming apocalypse that devours the adults. While adults fight against the slow violence of the disaster, trying to preserve a lifestyle that has become obsolete, grandparents and grandchildren, freed from the immediate demands of the market (105), focus on the continuity of time and the maintenance of affective bonds (Carlill 2024). They create a space of "organic mercy, grown deep inside

us, which makes it so much easier to care about small, close things, else how could we live?” (Greengrass 2021, 21).

The ethical core of the ‘ancestral alliance’ resides in the surpassing of the utilitarian view of elders as a mere social burden. In a context of scarcity, the survivalist logic of “hierarchical relationships between humans” (Bookchin 1980, 62 in Tan 2019, 78) would suggest abandoning the weakest; on the contrary, these narratives echo the psychological concept of parentification (Spencer and Craig 2024, 12), but from a different perspective than before. The youth take care of the fragile bodies of the elders, as Sally tends to Grandy after he breaks his leg in *The High House*, or Lina looks after her sick and confused grandmother in *The City of Ember*. Yet, this care is not unidirectional; it is the ethical ‘price’ to access an archive of wisdom – or *Deep Time* (Bohm-Schnitker 2023, 40), which is a temporal prospect that extends long before collapse and potentially beyond it (Bartosch and Hoydis 2025, 2) – that would otherwise be lost.

In Jessie Greengrass’ novel, Grandy is a character that serves as an ontological anchor for the younger protagonists. While Pauly has no memory of a world before the rising water, and, Caro and Sally’s memories are only dedicated to remembering lost consumption items – “butter. Coffee. [...] Lemons. Frozen pizza. [Or] ice cubes” (Greengrass 2021, 182) – Grandy is the only one with a tangible memory of a previous world led by biological rhythms. As time passes, the characters grow within the four walls of the house, and Grandy gets frailer and more dependent on youth’s help. Yet, he reciprocates this physical and tangible support with the transmittance of an intangible stewardship, made of routine and teachings that prevent them from drowning, pushed down by the Anthropocene’s horrors:

I don’t remember Grandy getting old, but by the time I was in my mid-tens he had stopped swimming every day, [...] and I realised how long it had been since I saw him run [...]. After years of incremental alteration you stand, surrounded by your accommodations, and wonder for the first time at the fact that everything should, somehow, have come to this (82).

Grandy remembers when the sea was a companion and not an unstoppable menace. He explains to Sally that he has already seen the world change before and that, even though this end seems final, “there’ll be something left. A ruined living, maybe, and a hard world, but hasn’t it always been that way for most?” (117). This type of elders contrast the anxiety for the immediate happenings with a climate wisdom that recognizes the regenerative force of

nature (Tan 2019, 10). They teach the youth that the world has had a history before the catastrophe and that their mission is not to ‘solve’ the Anthropocene, but to accept and learn how to inhabit it with dignified resignation. Grandy’s mere existence goes against the emotional paralysis of the crisis, offering the youth a temporal grammar that includes a regeneration (Bartosch and Hoydis 2025, 8). However, he does more than transmitting memories and stewardship. In accordance with Tim Ingold’s (2000, 5) “Dwelling Perspective”, he offers vernacular knowledge, which is the only technology that will still work when the generators will break down (Hung 2017, 44). Hence, as illustrated in the example of the chickens recalled by Sally, knowledge is not merely abstract data but an embodiment of skills developed through direct engagement with the surroundings (Ingold 2000, 5):

He sent me down to the beach to collect mussel shells to grind for grit, which I scattered on the ground where the chickens liked to scratch.

– They need it to make eggshell,

he said,

– otherwise you get eggs with only a sack round them.

I didn’t think until later that, as much as he was caring for the animals and for the garden, he might be teaching me (Greengrass 2021, 130).

Here, the alliance is sealed: Sally lends her legs to collect shells, and Grandy lends his knowledge to ensure sustenance. However, this exchange is tied with inevitable decay. Drawing on Sacy Alaimo’s concept of trans-corporeality (2010b), Grandy’s aging can be seen as more than biological decay; it is, in fact, the somatic reflection of the eroding landscape. Like the receding and changing coastlines are shaped by the sea, his physical form alters: “his arms lengthened and his back shortened, his legs bowed” (Greengrass 2021, 82). Nonetheless, he does not fight this decay with the desperate denial typical of the adults, but accepts it as a biological inevitability, teaching Sally that, although “humans vanish in mortality” (Tan 2019, 10), their decline is connected to the cycle of nature, which “renews herself in a constant cycle of seasons and fertility” (10).

A similar, though cognitive, fragility is represented in *The City of Ember*. Lina’s grandmother, Granny, embodies the city’s fragmented memory. Although her mind is blurred, her obsessive digging into the past, metaphorically represented by the chaotic family house, is not merely a sign of dementia, but an act of cultural archeology, better known as

“archaeology of knowledge” (Foucault 1972). The dialogue regarding the “thing that was lost” (DuPrau 2003, 60) highlights the extreme necessity of the youth’s intervention: “‘Now it is lost’, she said. ‘But what was it?’ ‘He didn’t say.’ Lina gave up. It didn’t matter anyway. Probably the lost thing was the old man’s left sock, or his hairbrush. But for some reason, the story had taken root in Granny’s mind”. (DuPrau 2003, 49). While the middle generation, represented by Mayor Cole, sees nature and people as resources to consume until they last, and actively hides the past to maintain power, Granny protects the box with the Instructions because of her confusion. She acts as an unaware archive, protecting the object until Lina’s investigative agency is ready to decode it. This dynamic builds from intergenerational relationships an economy of care (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 8-9) that acts as political resistance against a system that views people only as resources.

Conversely, a comparative analysis reveals that this restorative intergenerational alliance is clearly absent in *Wilder Girls*. This is connected to the fact that, given Raxter’s Island total isolation and the necropolitical erasure of history, there are no local elders to offer wisdom and support. Thus, the girls are orphans of both the middle generation and the keepers of deep time, and are forced into a state of ontological disorientation. Consequently, without the elders to transmit them a coherent history, the girls’ brutal state of survival is exacerbated, and they are deprived of Paul Ricoeur’s “narrative consonance” (1984, 72) – the tools to connect these experiences into a meaningful whole – needed to imagine a future beyond the immediate struggle.

5.3.1) The Keepers of Deep Time: From Linear Anxiety to Circular Time

The Anthropocene has not only altered the biochemical cycles of planet Earth, but has also deeply distorted the perception of time. As analyzed in the previous paragraphs, the middle generation “suffer from an immobilizing anticipatory anxiety about the future” (Kaplan 2016, xix), which proceeds in a linear way as an “expansion of temporality” (Carlill 2019, 3) that becomes like a spear thrown towards inevitable destruction. Consequently, this “linear registration of events as they happen” (Kaplan 2016, 24) could be called *linear anxiety*. Within this scenario, the climate crisis is perceived as an impending apocalypse that voids every opportunity for a future, leading adults to an affective impasse or desperate parasitism (Carlill 2019, 1).

In contrast, this section explores how the elders serve as keepers of deep time. These

characters offer the young protagonists a “temporal grammar” (Ricoeur 1984) – drawing on Paul Ricoeur’s interplay between time and narrative – that extends long before the collapse and potentially beyond it (Bartosch and Hoydis 2025, 2), substituting the anxiety generated by the coming end with a regenerative memory that is capable of inhabiting the cycles of life (1-2).

The High House: A Novel presents the reader with a fundamental divergence in how adults and elders regard temporality: Grandy’s response to the crisis is based on a stewardship guided by ecological wisdom and temporal awareness, while adults, like Francesca and her husband, live in a time of scientific preparation, which is a linear time obsessed by a countdown – “There isn’t time” (Greengrass 2021, 46) says the scientist – to the apocalypse (Bartosch and Hoydis 2025, 5). For Francesca, the future is an entity that “slipped into the present” (Greengrass 2021, 208) under the shape of a catastrophe; it is an impasse that leads her to sacrifice her own affective presence to build a material shelter (Carlill 2024, 3). Conversely, Grandy inhabits the ‘circular time’ of the seasons that “fall[s] into one another” (12). He remembers a world before the catastrophe, connected not just to lost consumption items but to biological cycles. He explains to Sally that even when the sea invades the land, he does not see a definitive end, but a transformation:

I am an old man, and I have seen worlds end myself. I have seen the end of this village, for a start. [...] there’ll be something left. [...] All I can think is that what’s different now is that no one can claim this is progress (Greengrass 2021, 60-61 in Carlill 2024, 11).

Grandy’s pedagogy is not based on survivalism, but on a form of ‘vernacular stewardship’ – a synthesis between the place-based knowledge of Ruyu Hung (2017) and the ethical care of David Orr (1992) – better known as *Traditional Ecological Knowledge* (Berkes 2008). He is of the opinion that “it is not enough to have an ark, if you do not also have the skills to sail it” (Greengrass 2021, 123). Consequently, he teaches the young protagonists how to inhabit natural cycles with dignity through practical memory: how to cut the trees, how to grind seashells for chickens, and how to read the tides. This guidance of Grandy connects with David Orr’s concept of *ecological literacy*, where “the ecologically literate person has the knowledge to comprehend interrelatedness, and an attitude of care or stewardship” (Orr 1992, 86 in Hung 2017, 54). By transmitting these skills, Grandy provides Caro, Pauly and Sally the instruments to transform ecological grief into daily regenerative actions, moments to

which they “cling to, that we husband as carefully as we do everything else, so they might keep us going” (Greengrass 2021, 70). Consequently, they become capable of “observ[ing] nature with insights, a merger of landscape and mindscape” (Orr 1992, 86 in Hung 2017, 54).

If Grandy represents biological cycling, in *The City of Ember*, Granny embodies historical cycling and the necessity to recover the origins to start again from the beginning (Eliade 1959). However, there is a decisive contrast in how the adults, like Loris Harrow, and the elders use the past in Ember. Doon’s father uses memory as a passive and nostalgic refuge where to hide from a crumbling past, finding shelter within broken objects that he cannot repair (Tan 2019, 104). On the contrary, Granny’s confused search for something that “was lost a long time ago” (DuPrau 2003, 49) functions as an active trigger to motion. Her cultural archeology bridges the gap to the historical time of the Builders. Unlike the adults who accept the city’s decline as an inevitable happening (Tan 2019, 104), her connection to the origins forces Lina to look beyond the ordinariness of Ember’s crisis, guiding her to discover a world of light that existed long before the underground city.

The alliance between Granny and Lina is of functional and hermeneutical nature; and, their relationship perfectly illustrates Aleida Assmann’s distinction between *storage memory* and *functional memory* (Braun 2013, 628). Granny acts as the passive archive, the storage instinctively protecting the “beautifully made box” (DuPrau 2003, 98) without accessing its semantic value due to her dementia. She preserves the *signifier*, thus the instructions that would have quite certainly been lost (628-629), but it requires Lina’s investigative agency – heart [...] knocking at her chest like a fist at a door [...] [thrilled for having] found something strange and important” (DuPrau 2003, 79) – to retrieve the *signified*, which is the meaning (Braun 1023, 628-629). Without the elder to store the past and the youth to make it functional, the escape plan would have never materialized and the box would have stayed a useless mystery.

Consequently, the ancestral alliance suggests that survival within the Anthropocene requires a reconciliation with the historical and biological roots that the middle generation has severed in the name of progress (Hung 2017, 44). Elders do not offer technological solutions, but they offer context. If the middle generation used the ‘rope of the social contract’ – the promise of security and continuity defined by Rousseau (1762) – to tie their children to a dying world, grandparents teach youth how to use this same rope to build nets, berths, and escape routes. Ultimately, as Lina and Doon cast the message into the darkness, they prove that the wisdom of the deep past is the only compass capable of navigating the ruins of the future (Bartosch and Hoydis 2025, 2):

‘But how will they know there’s a way out, if no one tells them?’[Lina]said. ‘How will they know what to do?’ [...] ‘I think they will. People find a way through just about anything’. [...] Lina Mayfleet and Doon Harrow wrapped the message in Doon’s shirt and put a rock inside it. Then they stood in a row at the edge of the chasm, Doon in the middle holding Poppy’s hand and Lina’s. Lina took aim at the heart of the city, far beneath her feet. With all her strength, she cast the message into the darkness, and they watched as it plunged down and down (DuPrau 2003, 208; 214).

PART III

6) A Comparative Analysis of Venice as a YAD cli-fi Reality

In this chapter, the three previously analyzed young adult dystopian novels are employed as both metaphors and diagnostic tools to interpret the systemic fragility of the Venetian lagoon. Specifically, this section directly addresses the second part of the research question: How can YAD climate fiction narratives find a concrete application in the reality of a threatened ecosystem?

To answer this question, this thesis focuses on the city of Venice, which is a territory that does not constitute a mere “picturesque setting” (Iovino 2017, 55) that fosters dystopian imagination through stories about a flooded city (Akyol 2020, 119); rather, it represents the physical and tangible incarnation of the ontological challenges of the Anthropocene – “political, social, ethical and psychological” (118). As suggested by the novelist Arundhati Roy (2020, n.d. in Nadal and Peers 2022, 7), climate crisis function as a “portal”, a breaking that forces people to abandon the “carcasses of our prejudice and hatred” (7); but, they also act as a gateway that helps people imagine a new possible world. Within this framework, Venice qualifies as a ‘sacrifice zone’: a territory where Rob Nixon’s “neither spectacular nor instantaneous” (Pain and Cahill 2022, 360) slow violence is accepted in the name of short-term profit. Hence, the city ceases to be a background and reveals locally the impacts of global climate change (Akyol 2020, 115).

The analysis conducted in this chapter begins by identifying the three main types of erosion that are affecting the area of Venice: the physical degradation of the territory, the biochemical impacts on the ecosystem, and the social devouring of the local residential fabric (Cristiano and Gonella 2020). These three dynamics reflect in different ways the previously seen Mbembe’s concept of necropolitics (Brennan 2024, 5). By applying the literary lenses of *The City of Ember*, *The High House* and *Wilder Girls*, this chapter is going to unveil some specific mechanisms that metaphorically embody the “little tiles of the puzzle composing Venice’s ruin” (Fabbri 2003, 48-49 in Iovino 2017, 55): from the infrastructural blindness that characterizes the management of MOSE (Turner 2025, 308), to the toxic porosity of the ecosystem, up to the phenomenon of the “gentri-touristification” (Cristiano and Gonella 2020, 7) that expels residents from the city.

Consequently, by using these three novels as diagnostic instruments, it will be

possible to demonstrate that the crisis affecting Venice cannot be solved with a simple “technology fix” (Churchman 2010, 215 in Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 180). Instead, when ‘read’ through the lens of young adult dystopian climate fiction, the Venetian reality requires a shift from the idea of ‘risk management’ towards an approach aimed at the “practice of care” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 41). This implies recovering a vernacular and situated knowledge – akin to that used by the communities of Cree hunters “to assess the health of the environment and the integrity of the ecosystems” (Berkes 2008, 42) through biological signals – to learn new ways to inhabit the tides. Ultimately, this diagnosis lays the ground for proposing Venice as an ecological and intergenerational laboratory, where local youth are trained not merely as technicians, but as situated stewards, capable of decoding the ‘text’ of the city and the lagoon to guarantee survival in a post-apocalyptic future that has already begun.

6.1) The Vulnerability of a Fragile Ecosystem

Venice represents “much more than a fictional theme” (Iovino 2017, 48); it is a paradigmatic landscape of the Anthropocene characterized by a unique “amphibious beauty” (1) where the boundaries between natural forces and human intervention have collapsed. Geographically, the city is situated on the north-eastern coast of Italy and is surrounded by a lagoon that does not particularly differ from other tidal lagoons around the world – its morphology “is characterized by a network of canals of various depths, mud flats, tidal marshes and islets” (Bellucci et al. 2002, 36). Nonetheless, the Venetian lagoon is the largest in the Mediterranean Sea: it is “a 52 km long and 8-14 km wide shallow water” (Borg et al. 2014, 826) system with “an average depth of approximately 1 meter”, “linked to the northern Adriatic sea by three inlets namely Lido, Malamocco and Chioggia” (826). However, to fully understand the current vulnerability affecting the Venetian lagoon, one must recognize that this territory is not solely a natural formation, but a co-evolutionary artifact “of soil, plants, art, and productive practices” (Iovino 2017, 126) shaped through the centuries by human intervention.

Historically, Venice’s survival depended on a delicate negotiation with water. For centuries, the Republic of Venice was forced to defend itself on multiple fronts: it diverted major rivers – such as the Piave, Brenta, and Sile – to shape the lagoon and prevent it from the risk of silting and turning into part of the mainland, while simultaneously “provid[ing]

defence against the sea itself” (Ciriaco 2018, 141). As Bevilacqua (1995, 7, my translation) notes, Venice was “a maritime centre of the first order, but one that a set of unstoppable forces, natural and social, had a tendency to bury, to transform into marshland”⁴. The lagoon has thus always been “the product of a natural evolution where the same dynamic forces that cooperated with it for millennia, have become a threat: the inland rivers and the sea”⁵ (38, my translation). Today, however, the Anthropocene has inverted this dynamic: the city no longer fears turning into land, but becoming sea. This delicate “transitional environment” (Borg et al. 2014, 826) is now threatened by a convergence of anthropogenic hazards and natural phenomena that have rendered the area a structurally fragile reality (826). Consequently, Venice is abandoning a condition of managed equilibrium (Bevilaqua 1995, 47) to welcome a reality of permanent crisis, where the erosion of the ecosystem is happening at a faster rate than the regeneration processes.

The concept of vulnerability is usually described as “the human product of any physical exposure to a disaster that results in some degree of loss” (Borg et al. 2014, 828). In the case of Venice, this vulnerability is largely rooted in the industrial choices made in the 20th century. Specifically, the lagoon’s physical alteration traces back to 1920, “when the first industrial district of Porto Marghera was built [...] through the infilling of 550 ha of marshes” (Bellucci et al. 2002, 36). This process intensified during the “Great Acceleration” (McNeill and Engelke 2014) following World War I and, “especially after World War II” (Bellucci et al. 2002, 36), when a second industrial district was built in the same area. While the lagoon’s hydraulic balance had already been tested by “the diversions of rivers operated by the Serenissima” – which “generated imbalances [...] that were never completely made whole”⁶ (Bevilacqua 1995, 11 my translation) – modern anthropogenic activities have had a far more aggressive impact on the lagoon’s morphology.

Between 1930 and 1969, the lagoon floor was progressively deprived of sediments

⁴ “un centro marittimo di prima grandezza, ma che un insieme di forze irresistibili, naturali e sociali, tendeva a interrare, a trasformare in palude” (Bevilacqua 1999, 7).

⁵ “La laguna era il frutto di un’evoluzione naturale a cui nei millenni avevano cooperato le stesse forze dinamiche che ora la insidiavano: i fiumi dell’entroterra e il mare” (Bevilacqua 1995, 38).

⁶ “Le diversioni dei fiumi operate dalla Serenissima per salvare la laguna dagli interrimenti avevano prodotto squilibri nei naturali assetti idraulici delle terre interne mai definitivamente sanati” (Bevilacqua 1995, 11).

and ‘wounded’ by the excavation of deep navigational channels. Most notably, the *Canale dei Petroli* – built in the 1960s to connect the inlet of Malamocco with the industrial hub of Porto Marghera – and the Vittorio Emanuele III canal “deeply modified the hydrography of the central lagoon expanding the influence of the Adriatic Sea” (Bellucci et al. 2002, 36). These interventions altered the local hydrodynamics, drastically increasing the volume and speed of water exchange between the lagoon and the sea (D’Alpaos and Carniello, 2010, 123). This triggered a process defined by Luigi D’Alpaos and Luca Carniello (2010, 114) as *marinizzazione* (marine-ization): the lagoon is gradually transforming into an arm of the open sea, losing its transitional nature. This shift is visible in the growing disappearance of the *barene* (salt marshes), the spongy islets that historically acted as buffers against tides and as ‘natural lungs’ for the local ecosystem (113).

Furthermore, this erosion is critically exacerbated by the combined effects of subsidence – the sinking of the soil triggered by last century’s aggressive groundwater extraction for industrial purposes – and global eustasy, commonly known as sea-level rise (113). Looking to the near future, the lagoon is projected to become a territory increasingly besieged on several fronts, suffering simultaneously from “sea-level rise, subsidence, erosion, pollution, fishery activities, and wave motion” (Borg et al. 2014, 826). As a result of these compounding impacts, the complex case of the Venetian territory has evolved into a physical manifestation of “legislative, scientific, and institutional intricacy” (826), a site where the temporal scale of environmental change has been unnaturally accelerated by anthropogenic intervention.

This physical degradation is not accidental but rather structural. Consequently, the territory is facing a systemic threat. Echoing Stephanie LeMenager, predatory capitalism projects the cancellation of the global future (Fuchs and Maierhofer 2024, 7), enforcing a logic where territories are consumed for immediate gain. Within this framework, the Venetian lagoon has been treated as a ‘sacrifice zone’: a warehouse for mass tourism and industrial transit rather than a living ecosystem. This dynamic reflects Pain and Cahill’s (2022, 360) “politics of disposability”, which targets “people and place inextricably”. As a result, the Venetian crisis does not manifest through a singular catastrophic event, but through the mechanisms of slow violence: an “incremental and accretive” (360) destruction that stays largely invisible to the tourist’s eye. This violence, “creeping, or even bleeding through spaces, through families, through soils and land, through urban fabrics” (362), is impacting most severely those communities whose existence is tied to the water.

Consequently, taking from Roy’s (2020 in Nadal and Peers 2022, 7) idea of “portal”,

Venice represents the gateway through which it is possible to observe the definitive rupture between the model of civilization inherited from the 20th century and an uncertain planetary future. The city functions as what Amitav Ghosh (2016) would identify as a frontline of the climate crisis for global coastal civilizations. However, the reality of Venice is a synecdoche, comprising the entire area of the “Delta grande” (Abruzzese et al. 2024). What is happening here – more specifically, the administration response to the struggles against rising waters and human displacement – exemplifies Evgenji Morozov’s (2014 in Abruzzese et al. 2024) “technological solutionism”⁷, which focuses on the mitigation of the symptoms instead of intervening on the causes; and, it anticipates the fate of many other coastal cities all around the world. As Nadal and Peers (2022, 7) observe, “our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to normality [...] and refusing to acknowledge the rupture”. Yet, Venice allows no such denial. The water rising in the city’s canals is tangible proof that environmental stability is an illusion. It is crucial to recognize this break: as suggested by Fuchs and Maierhofer (2024, 15), only by acknowledging the crisis will it be possible to promote an “intergenerational pro-social behaviour” capable of “making home of a broken world”.

Thus, the vulnerability of Venice – understood not merely as the city’s natural fragility for being built on water, but as the result of a political system that treats the ecosystem as a resource to exploit (Cristiano and Gonella 2022, 2) – serves as the starting point of our analysis. The following sections will employ speculative narratives as diagnostic lenses to dissect the three specific facets of the Venetian crisis introduced at the beginning of this chapter, moving from the general fragility of the ecosystem to the specific mechanism of its potential collapse.

6.2) Diagnostic Parallelism: From Literary Tropes to Lagoon Reality

Having established Venice as a site of systemic fragility, it is necessary to adopt new interpretative tools to analyze its crisis. Adopting the framework of *material ecocriticism* and using the words of Serenella Iovino (2017, 49), we must ask ourselves: “what do we see in Venice, if we read it as a text? What is its ‘material narrative’?”. The “rupture” (Nadal and Peers 2022, 7) between the past perception of the city and its uncertain future requires us to

⁷ “Soluzionismo tecnologico” (Morozov 2014, in Abruzzese et al. 2024).

move beyond traditional descriptions. As argued in Chapter Two, while conventional modes of representation often fail to capture the full complexities of the slow violence taking place beneath the surface, fiction offers a unique vantage point. Therefore, the following sections employ the previously analyzed young adult dystopian cli-fi narratives not merely as fiction, but as diagnostic lenses to decode the invisible transformations of the lagoon.

By juxtaposing the Venetian narrative with the fictional worlds of *The City of Ember*, *The High House* and *Wilder Girls*, it is possible to identify and isolate three different dimensions of the crisis that often remain hidden. Through this parallelism, speculative tropes illuminate the specific symptoms of the Venetian reality: the infrastructural illiteracy, the biochemical permeability of the ecosystem, and the phenomenon of “tourist monoculture” (Cristiano and Gonella 2020, 2) that are eroding the social fabric of the territory. This comparative approach reveals that the Venetian crisis should not be intended as a sole matter of physical degradation, but fundamentally as a crisis of knowledge and care systems, which requires a shift from passive acceptance to active stewardship.

6.2.1) The Technocratic Veil: the Crisis of Infrastructures and *The City of Ember*

In *The City of Ember*, the city’s survival completely depends on a massive, decaying Generator. However, no one actually knows how it works; the citizens revere this machine with almost religious devotion, blindly trusting the wisdom of the Builders while ignoring the flickering lights that signal an imminent systemic blackout. Venice lives a disturbingly similar paradox. While it is a territory that inherently “respires with the moon” (Iovino 2017, 50), its survival has been delegated to the MOSE (Experimental Electromechanical Module⁸). Conceived in 1984 as the ultimate technological solution for the lagoon’s high tides, this infrastructure was “one of the biggest financial businesses in Italy and the latest misreading of the city’s material textuality” (Iovino 2017, 55).

This “monstrous solution” (De Lucia 2013, 90 in Iovino 2017, 55) was tested for the first time only in 2020, after decades of controversies, delays, and corruption investigations (Maggi 2024, 16). In 2014, the project was marked by a corruption scandal, which resulted “in the conviction of thirtyfive people, including Venice’s former mayor Giorgio Orsoni” (Iovino 2017, 56). This betrayal of public trust perfectly mirrors Ember’s Mayor Cole: both

⁸ “Modulo Sperimentale Elettro-meccanico” (Iovino 2017, 55).

the mayors transformed a public protective infrastructure into a mechanism for private profit. Moreover, despite the costs, this infrastructure was immediately proved “insufficient for its purpose [and] sadly ‘anti-historical’” (55). Much like Ember’s Generator, this huge engineering project, designed to protect the lagoon from tides up to 3 meters high (Maggi 2024, 18), often functions as a technocratic ‘black box’: a system where inputs and outputs are clearly visible, but the ‘internal workings’ are hidden or rendered incomprehensible to the public, handled exclusively by a technical elite. Venetians, like DuPrau’s characters, have been reduced to delegating their safety to an infrastructure whose workings stay invisible to citizens and whose management is marked by lack of transparency (16). As noted by Turner (2025, 303), the crisis of Venice is inextricably connected with the mismanagement of its vital protective mechanisms: landscape safeguarding, hydraulic equilibrium, and socioeconomic vitality. The stability offered by MOSE risks generating a form of systemic blindness that produces a discrepancy between technological help and long-term sustainability. Similarly to the citizens in *The City of Ember* – conducting their lives in a state of passive attendance of the Builders to come back and save them, Venetians, being infrastructural illiterate, entrust their safety to a machine while staying oblivious to the processes that affect and determine their survival. Consequently, just as the young Doon Harrow actively explores the ‘insides’ of his city to find out what is happening, Venetian youth should question what is going on beneath their feet.

While Ember is a closed system close to collapse, Venice is a fragile lagoon ecosystem where tourist and environmental load limits have been exceeded. Currently, the local ecosystem faces a paradoxical dual threat. With a rising sea-level of the Mediterranean expected around the 45 centimeters by 2100 (Maggi 2024, 16), the territory risks transforming into a stretch of open sea, or, conversely, becoming a “closed coastal basin” (Tagliapietra and Umgiesser 2023, 1) due to artificial barriers like the MOSE. Both scenarios entail severe ecological consequences. Since the lagoon is a reality driven by tides – with mesh net channels that spread across the land like arteries – its biological structure is defined by and depends on the cyclical movement of water and its consequent shaping of landforms (1). A closed system, enforced by the frequent use of MOSE, would annihilate “the ecological function of the tides”, making the lagoon more fragile and transforming the lagoon into a lifeless and stagnant pond by stopping “the exchange of genetic material with the sea” and the “migration of marine organisms” (1).

Conversely, without intervention, the scenario is equally grim. “The sea level rise accelerates [the] transformation to a more marine environment, upsetting [the] stable sense of

place” (Turner 2025, 49) and erasing the unique Mediterranean saltmarsh habitats, also known as *barene*. At the local level, this transformation manifests as a form of “attritional violence” (Pain and Cahill 2022, 360) – a form of destruction dispersed across time and space. As Turner notes, the lagoon has been for several centuries “in a state of net erosion [...], meaning that it tends to lose more sediment than it gains” (Turner 2025, 305). This natural tendency, however, has been drastically accelerated by anthropogenic activities, leaving the territory much like the leaking pipelines in the novel: “Not only were the lights about to fail [...], but the water system was breaking down. The whole city was crumbling, and what was anyone doing about it?” (DuPrau 2003, 40). The “Great Acceleration” (McNeill and Engelke 2014) of human activities, from the traffic of *Grandi Navi* to the excavation of deep underwater channels like the *Canale dei Petroli*, acts as a catalyst for erosion. These interventions rip apart saltmarshes and hydrodynamics, blurring the boundaries between water and land, and creating unpredictable and constantly mutating landscapes (Ghosh 2004 in Bohm-Schnitker 2024, 49). “Without interventions that counter erosion, lagoon morphology becomes less like an estuary and more like the open sea” (Turner 2025, 310), removing its ability to act as a natural shield against the “changes in average sea-level” (310). Similarly to the Ember’s collapsing Generator, the lagoon’s natural defense system is crumbling; however, it is not because of obsolescence, but due to forced modernization.

Consequently, by analyzing how the Venetian administration manages this collapse, it will be possible to better understand the local crisis’ political dimension. In DuPrau’s novel, Mayor Cole lies and steals from the community, prioritizing his survival over the citizens’ well being. This dynamic mirrors the necropolitics of the MOSE administration. Crucially, closing the lagoon inlets is not a neutral act; it functions as a necropolitical apparatus. Within this context, sovereignty is exercised through the “discriminatory management of the hydrologic risk” (301): every time the barriers are lifted, the State exercises a decisional power over which part of the system is to be protected or sacrificed (301). The Lagoon is thus becoming a sacrifice zone where social survival is subordinated to utilitarian calculations (Maggi 2024, 1). This choice favors the conservation of ‘stationary capital’ – such as the city monuments and the historical site of Piazza San Marco – at the expense of the ecological dynamics and the health of the entire lagoon’s ecosystem (Tagliapietra and Umgiesser 2023, 1).

The technological shield of the MOSE risks becoming a veil that conceals the ongoing slow violence, transforming maintenance into a practice of solitary resistance against

biological and bureaucratic decay (Turner 2025, 310-311). And, driven by “direct and short-term profit” (Cristiano and Gonella 2020, 4), political corruption and future blindness have systematically led authorities to ignore the signals of collapse, favouring the interests of extractive elites. In this context, the MOSE moving barriers represent a double-edged sword. While offering an immediate protection from spectacular high tides (*Acqua Alta*), they introduce a dangerous discrepancy in temporal scales. MOSE workers testify that political decisions are often tuned to the short-term scale of ‘weather’ – the singular high tide event, ignoring the long-term scale of ‘climate’, which indicates the irreversible trend (Turner 2025, 309). The scandals concerning the poor management of MOSE mirror Mayor Cole’s handling of the crisis in Ember: while he ignores the looming darkness to maintain the citizens calm and in order, Venetian authorities focus on guaranteeing the continuity of the tourist business (309), masking the reality that MOSE will soon become obsolete. In fact, at the moment the system is structurally unprepared to address the irreversible rise of average sea level, which would require such frequent closures that the infrastructure would not keep up or would become lethal to the lagoon’s biological life “well before the end of this century” (Tagliapietra and Umgieser 2023, 1). Consequently, the inhabitants, rendered unwilling heirs of a past led by short-sighted decisions, find themselves in the same position as Lina and Doon: depending on a complex machine handled with poor transparency while holding fragments of a broken system. The Instructions left by the Builders to survive the crisis in the novel have been lost over the years. Similarly, the specific technical know-how of MOSE workers is trapped in a bureaucratic “interregnum” of precarity (Turner 2025, 310). As one worker states: “we need new people ... the sooner it gets done, the less afraid we’ll be of this wall that will finish us sooner or later” (311).

Ultimately, in a city such Venice, which is an “economic monoculture” (Cristiano and Gonella 2020, 2) that consumes more than the lagoon can regenerate, residents are treated as mere “biopolitical substance” (Weheliye 2014, 55 in Brennan 2024, 6) to be managed, much like Ember’s citizens are managed through the rationing of supplies. Everyday life loses its autonomy and is subjected to management protocols that are reminiscent of Ember’s dynamics. The absence of occupational diversity and the dependence on foreign capital make the entire urban organism extremely vulnerable to unexpected events, as proven by the total paralysis due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Cristiano and Gonella 2020, 8). During that time of emptiness, it became clear that without the ‘parasite-tourist’, the ‘city-host’ lacked the instruments to survive independently (9). This deep social erosion indicates that Venice has surpassed its “sustainability threshold” (Rova et al. 2023, 1), working in a condition of

permanent imbalance between the regenerative ability of the social ecosystem and the extractive flux required by the market. The parallel with the novel written by Jeanne DuPrau suggests that relying on the Builders – the bureaucratic elites – is no longer a viable option. Consequently, survival requires recovering the lost instructions in the same way that Lina and Doon did: learn a new form of ecological literacy that shifts the attention from the machine to its destroyed ecosystem.

6.2.2) The Porous Body: Biochemical Erosion and *Wilder Girls*

Can you imagine traveling to a place that local residents claim is polluted by toxins to witness the bodies and landscapes that supposedly have been affected? Would – or could – you risk exposing your own body? Or would you instead refuse, given the chance that the smell, sounds, contagions, and stories would be too much? (Pezzullo 2009, 1)

While the previous section focused on the analysis of the quantitative, physical management of water, this section shifts the lens to the qualitative degradation of the ecosystem. Historically, the Republic of Venice had to handle the “age-old conflict between the need to protect the aquatic environment and the existence of economic activities (land reclamation, fish farming, salt works, milling, the harvesting of reeds and grasses) that might be in conflict with that priority” (Ciriaco 2018, 142). This made the city inextricably interwoven with the lagoon waters and created an environment “where human activities and natural dynamics have always been interconnected” (Pizzini et al. 2024, 1). However, recent anthropogenic activities have significantly disrupted this delicate balance. The erosion is not merely physical, but biochemical as well, transforming the lagoon from a vital “transitional environment” (1), into a toxic assemblage.

In Chapter Four, we observed that in Rory Power’s *Wilder Girls*, the horror manifests through the spreading of the Tox, a pathogen released from melting ice that mutates flora and fauna, creating aggressive and hybrid organisms on the island of Raxter. Venice faces a similar, albeit slower, invasion. Just as the Tox penetrates the ecosystem, the lagoon is permeated by a mixture of “Contaminants of Emerging Concern (CECs)” (Pizzini et al. 2024, 1). This invisible mixture includes pharmaceuticals, pesticides, neonicotinoids, antioxidants, UV filters, and microplastics that originate from agricultural, civil and industrial discharges

(1). Unlike the immediate violence of a flood, these substances accumulate within water, biota, and sediments, altering local biodiversity in an almost imperceptible yet irreversible way (1). This dynamic constitutes a form of biochemical violence that permeates the vital tissue of the lagoon, transforming it – similarly to the ‘trans-corporeal’ mutations of the girls in Rory Power’s novel – into a permeable and “vulnerable” body, “capable of being physically wounded” (Alaimo 2010b, 24). Moreover, like the Tox is an internal mutation that cannot be washed away, Venice’s pollution has sedimented into the very mud of the lagoon, becoming a constitutive element of the landscape.

This reality finds a disturbing echo in the physical transformations described by Rory Power. In the novel, the young characters’ bodies become maps of their environment’s toxicity: Byatt grows a second external spine, while Hetty’s right eye mutates after a flare-up, “lid fused shut, something growing underneath” (Power 2019, 9). These grotesque transformations literalize Stacy Alaimo’s concept of “trans-corporeality” (2010b), where the human body is continuously intermeshed with the environment’s fluxes of toxic material (Pizzini et al. 2024, 1). Similarly, Venice is not ‘pure nature’; rather, it “represents the discordant harmony of elements upon which human civilization lies” (Iovino 2017, 49), embodying a site for “becoming with” (Haraway 2008 in Nadal and Peers 2022, 8) the toxic. The immediate vicinity of the petrochemical site of Porto Marghera and the relentless traffic of big cruise and cargo ships have saturated the ecosystem with heavy metals, pollutants, and dredged materials – sometimes handled and disposed irregularly because of the “malice of private individuals” (Ciriaco 2018, 144). Like the girls on Raxter, who cannot separate themselves from the frightening woods, the lagoon – a hybrid exercise of land and water mixed into a new “elemental combination” (Iovino 2017, 49) – and its inhabitants, both human and more-than-human, unwillingly absorb these substances. This dynamic follows – and, in turn, have an impact on – the phenomenon of *bioaccumulation*: toxins and chemicals do not disappear completely; rather, they persist and travel up the food chain, from the sediment to the fish, and finally to the humans who inhabit this “amphibious” (Iovino 2016, 1) space, affecting the health of the whole ecosystem (Streit 1992, 955). Consequently, the boundaries between biological body and industrial history collapse: now the industry is literally *in* the body.

This overlap between industrial areas and sites of ancient beauty creates a “geography of risk” (Pain and Cahill 2022, 365) that reflects Achille Mbembe’s necropolitics: the biological health of residents has been sacrificed for decades in the name of profit (365), favored by some cases of legislation leeway’s, which allowed exceptions “that were normally

prohibited [...] depending upon certain concrete circumstances” (Avanzi 1993 in Ciriaco 2018, 144). In *Wilder Girls*, the Navy decided to quarantine the island, promising a non-existent cure while effectively leaving the girls to die to contain the infection. The girls understand that they have never truly been patients to be saved, but biomass to be managed or discarded. This dynamic mirrors the history of Porto Marghera – an industrial area extending for “18 kilometers [...] of navigable waterways, 33 km [...] of docks, and over 2000 hectares of industrialized peninsulas that, like metastases, [spread] into water” (Fabbri 2003, 37-38 in Iovino 2017, 56). For decades, the biological health of residents has been sacrificed in the name of industrial profit, creating a “death-world” where the citizens – exposed to health-impairing carcinogens, fumes, vibrations, and noises accepted as the price for economic development (56) – “are subjected to living conditions that confer them the status of the *living dead*” (Mbembe 2019, 92 in Brennan 2024, 4). The pollution emanating from this site, defined by Serenella Iovino (2017, 57) as the “anti-Venice”, acts as a form of slow violence that disproportionately affects the most vulnerable communities – those defined by Bales as [the] “disposable people” (Pain and Cahill 2022, 360) within “the cannibal mechanism of the development narrative” (Iovino 2017, 57). As the Navy observes and controls Raxter from a safe distance, the regulatory system of Venice often manages the ‘allowable limits’ of toxicity rather than completely eliminating the source, treating the lagoon as a recipient of waste rather than a living organism.

Finally, similarly to Hetty and her friend’s shift from waiting for a non-existing cure to embracing their ‘monstrosity’, Venetian youth need to have a change in perspective. The girls realize that they are not ‘things’ that need to be fixed, they have become “the wilderness” (Power 2019, 219). Similarly, to accept the reality of Venice means recognizing that the lagoon is a hybrid organism where toxicity has become a constitutive element of life. This requires a radical adaptation: no longer the nostalgic search for a lost ‘pure’ nature, but the development of a biological citizenship aware of mutations derived from industrial processes (Tagliapietra and Umgiesser 2023, 2). Consequently, the youth born in Venice today find themselves in the position of ‘unwilling heirs’, forced to handle the consequences of an inherited development model that has consumed their future. This condition connects to the concept of “rotting past” (Butler 1993, 68 in Williams 2023, 23): new generations inherit an ecological and social debt from previous generations who prioritized immediate profit over long-term sustainability. Much like the protagonists confined on Raxter island, who must learn to survive in a hostile, mutated forest, Venetian youth inhabit a sacrifice zone marked by a “melancholic anticipation of loss” (Fuchs and Maierhofer 2024, 9). Taking from

Andreas Malm (2021, 99) idea that “it can never, ever be too late” to fight for a cause, the youth challenge is not to bring their city back to a mythical past, but to learn how to care and fight for a body – the lagoon – that has been irreversibly mutated.

6.2.3) The Commercialized Carcass: Social Erosion and *The High House*

The third face of the slow violence affecting Venice regards the erosion of the social fabric, a phenomenon best described through the ecological metaphor of *monoculture*. In agriculture, a monoculture is a system based on a farm’s annual mass production of the same single crop – a commercial practice that guarantees immediate profits but depletes the soil, making the environment extremely vulnerable to parasites and collapse (Elouattassi et al. 2023, 45). Applying this concept to the urban reality, it emerges that Venice – “a city half fairy tale, half tourist trap (Iovino 2017, 66) – has been “over-simplified” into a toxic “tourist monoculture” (Cristiano and Gonella 2020, 2; see also Pezzullo 2009, 2). Just as a monoculture erases biodiversity, the original social and productive diversity of the territory has been erased by the “gentro-touristification” – a term that originates from the interconnected nature of the two phenomena of gentrification and touristification (Cristiano and Gonella 2020, 7) – of the city to favour a singular extractive flux (2). Consequently, while the urban economy focuses on profit maximization for a few selected actors, often foreign, the social fabric of residents is sacrificed. The result is a “robust-yet-fragile” (2) system: an apparent stability that depends exclusively on a constant flow of visitors that “make waste, take resources, destroy – or at minimum, transform – places, and encourage local communities literally to sell themselves and to commodify their culture for money” (Pezzullo 2009, 2); rendering the city incapable of managing the typical uncertainties of the Anthropocene. As proven by the total paralysis during the COVID-19 pandemic (Cristiano and Gonella 2020 2; 5), when the parasite-tourist stopped feeding, the city-host revealed it had lost the ability to sustain itself (5).

This dynamic finds a powerful diagnostic parallel in Jessie Greengrass’s *The High House*. The novel is spatially divided into two areas: the safe and well stocked High House, an ark designed to protect a selected few; and the village down in the valley, which is left to drown when the flood comes. This geography of exclusion perfectly mirrors the reality of Venice. *The High House* epitomizes the city visited by the tourists – with its luxury hotels, the Airbnb empire, and the cherished historical monuments and bridges – which is protected and sustained by state investments, like the MOSE. Conversely, the village represents the

residential fabric, which is abandoned to the rising tides of the market. Here, the praxis of necropolitics is applied to urban planning: the power to decide which urban functions – and consequently which citizens – are to be considered “superfluous” (Brennan 2024, 5) and can be sacrificed for the survival of the industry. In the novel, the scientist-mother Francesca explicitly chooses who to save based on utility and relation, making the lucid decision to leave the rest of the community to perish. Similarly, the Venetian administration, based on “an economic system feeding on tourists” (Iovino 2017, 69), exercises a discriminatory management, in which necropolitics manifest as neglect. Millions are invested to protect the architectural shell for tourist consumption, while emptying the city of its essential functions (Turner 2025, 301): schools, hospitals, post offices, and local businesses are sold off “to private enterprises seeking profit in the tourist sector” and converted into hotels or touristy shops (Cristiano and Gonella 2020, 4; 7).

In the novel, the character of Francesca dedicates her life to prepare a high-tech shelter filled with supplies, seeds, and books, obsessed with preserving the objects of civilization rather than the living community. Venice is undergoing a similar process. The safeguard mandate of the State appears to be primarily oriented towards the preservation of stationary capital – real estate value and the artistic heritage – “without reference to people except to guarantee the territory’s ‘socioeconomic vitality’” (Turner 2025, 304). Drawing on Giovenco et al. (2025, 4), Nadal and Peers (2022, 7), this result can be defined as a *commercialized carcass*: an empty architectural wrap preserved for aesthetic appreciation, void of the social ‘heart’ necessary for the city’s survival (Giovenco et al. 2025, 4-5). For the Venetian people, the lagoon is not merely a body of water or a backdrop for aesthetic photos; rather, it is what aboriginal communities call “Country” (Botelho 2023, 25): a web of reciprocal care that encompasses land, water, humans, non-humans, knowledge and relations (25). By prioritizing the city’s architectural preservation over the residents, the city is deprived of its identity, drifting towards a reality of *musealization* (Giovenco et al. 2025, 4-5).

Finally, the condition of the survivors in the novel reflects the existential angst of the Venetian youth. In *The High House*, the young Pauly and Caro survive in safety, but their life could be compared to the role of a museum curator. They spend their days tending the garden and cataloging the books of a dead world, haunted by the memory of the village that they saw drown. This is the exact same condition of the unwilling heir of Venice. Young residents find themselves inhabiting a city presented to visitors as a museum exhibit. With “nearly half of the beds in the city [...] currently dedicated to tourists” (Cristiano and Gonella 2020, 4) and a

population that has drastically decreased to the point of becoming an ‘endangered species’ within their own habitat (Giovenco et al. 2025, 4), they face a future of “semi-citizenship” (De Freitas et al. 2023, 13), where the access to public spaces and services is mediated and often obstructed by market logic. Like Pauly, who is safe but has inherited a lonely future, young Venetians are trapped in a melancholic anticipation of loss (Carlill 2024, 15): they are forced to act as stewards/servants in a city that no longer has space for their everyday lives, dwelling in a home that has been sold out from under their feet. Much like the High House survives the flood but becomes the site of a sterile survival, Venice might be saved from the water by the MOSE, but will also be deprived of its community, remaining a hollow shell in a dying lagoon.

6.3) From Diagnosis to Care: Why an Ecological Laboratory is needed?

The analysis conducted thus far reveals that the safeguard of Venice has remained trapped in what could be defined as a ‘technocentrism of safety’, an approach that finds its literary parallel in the figure of Francesca in *The High House*. Just as she dedicates years to building the perfect material ‘ark’ but fails to provide her children with the emotive, cognitive, and practical instruments to inhabit the collapse, the Venetian management of the MOSE is configured as a metaphoric technocratic ‘black box’. This massive infrastructure embodies the myth of the “ultimate technological solution” (Maggi 2024, 16), promising to stop time and protect the city from high tides, yet systemically ignoring the scale of climate change and the unstoppable rise of sea levels (Turner 2025, 310). The failure of this model lies in its rigidity: the MOSE does not offer the lagoon a long term vision for survival based on relations within a living ecosystem (310); rather it creates a boundary. To rely blindly on a machine – originally built to satisfy need for power and the greed of few politicians, who did not have the wellbeing and safety of the territory at heart (Ciconte, Forgione, and Sales 2017, 244-247) – without understanding its structural limits produces a form of systemic blindness that makes the population reliant and passive, lacking the infrastructural literacy necessary to survive a potential technological blackout (310-311). Ultimately, we cannot pretend to dominate nature through technique; rather, as suggested by the critical situations depicted in *Wilder Girls* and *The High House*, we must learn how to practice what Lisa Baraitser (2015, 29 in Turner 2025, 314) calls “endurance”: a psychosocial practice of care that is opposed to the stagnant logic of productivity to keep alive over time relationships and spaces.

One possible antidote to this technocratic drifting emerges from the recovery of vernacular knowledge. While Francesca's scientific preparation fails because it is sterile and isolating, it is the character of Grandy who teaches the youth true stewardship through everyday acts of care. In Venice, this translates in recovering a situated, profound type of knowledge: the ability to 'read' the signals of the sea, to know how to fish, and how to maintain the lagoon's morphology – to live in its amphibian environment (Tagliapietra and Umgiesser 2023, 3). To inhabit the tides with boots and boardwalks is not merely an inconvenience, rather it requires a connection, somatic and affective, with the territory, integrating a plurality of biological and cultural variables that tends to be overlooked (Berkes 2008, 187). Hence, it becomes a "way of life" (8) that requires constant physical and affective engagement with the city. This shift implies adopting the Venetian ethic of the "scomenzèra" (Turner 2025, 312), thus embodying the logic of trial and error. Unlike the monolithic certainty of the MOSE, *scomenzèra* means starting a project by observing with humility the effects it generates within the ecosystem, forsaking the illusion of total control (312). This "knowledge as process" (Berkes 2008, 4) transforms maintenance into an ethical act of care, where reciprocity between human and environment ceases to be utilitarian and becomes symbiotic (46).

However, this knowledge is currently at risk of extinction. If adults – like the Builders of *The City of Ember* and the parents in *The High House* – have failed in their role as architects of a sustainable future, the burden of surviving within the Anthropocene is now left to the youth. This responsibility requires a radical shift in perspective because, as Karen Barad (2007, 26 in Iovino 2017, 4) explains, "we are part of that nature that we seek to understand". Yet, we cannot expect to inherit this complex 'literacy of the lagoon' by osmosis, especially in a city that is slowly pushing its youth away towards the mainland. To avoid young Venetians becoming disempowered spectators of their city's end, it is crucial to transform them into situated stewards: subjects capable of decoding the urban and biological 'text' of the lagoon. This approach draws directly from the theory of material ecocriticism, "an epistemological-critical project meant to both redesign the category of text and reframe the interpreter's role in the becoming of the examined reality" (Iovino 2017, 4). Crucially, reading Venice requires recognizing that "when the text we interpret is a material one [...] we cannot ignore that this text possesses a particular trait: it contains the interpreter herself" (4). The lagoon is thus framed not as a passive backdrop, but as "storied matter": a living site of intersections and mutual dependence of "collectives of human and nonhuman" agencies (4). However, it is important to consider that there are different elements of struggle that can

prevent this youth transformation: from finding the strength to go against Misiaszek's "fatalistic teaching" and to contrast feelings of helplessness, to claiming their right of inhabiting the city as active citizens.

Consequently, this transition cannot happen spontaneously; it requires a dedicated space. The intergenerational transmission of that regenerative memory and vernacular care, represented by Grandy, requires a physical infrastructure that operates differently from the traditional school or the tourist museum. Only through an *Ecopedagogical Laboratory* that allows youth to get their hands wet and practice the *scomenzèra* of care will it be possible to inhabit Venice again not as a carcass, but as a vital and resilient reality.

7) An Ecopedagogical Proposal: “Venice as an Ecological Laboratory”

Having established the diagnostic parallels between the Venetian crisis and the three chosen young adult dystopian climate fiction novels, this chapter addresses the final component of the research question: how can ecological imagination be enhanced through concrete pedagogical practices? The laboratory titled “Venice as an Ecological Laboratory” is designed not merely as an extracurricular class, but as a pilot proposal of participatory research that paves the way for future experiments on youth’s political and affective rehabilitation. Targeting local youth aged 13 to 17 – a generation suspended between the technological myth of the MOSE and the harsh reality of unprecedented sea level rise – the project aims to transform unwilling heirs into situated stewards during a period of time of approximately six months.

This ecopedagogical laboratory proposal is relevant because it connects together the broader topics of Material Ecocriticism, Place-Based Education, Student-Based Research, Participatory Research and Urban Political Ecology. More specifically, it addresses some overlooked or unanswered questions of standard environmental curricula, such as: How can narrative fictions be used as a tool to read the hidden or unperceived slow violence of a territory? How can Venetian youth avoid succumbing to the fatalism derived from living in a sacrifice zone? Just as marginalized communities often develop new unique forms of knowledge and resilience, this laboratory encourages youth in finding their form of situated stewardship.

The proposal is configured as a direct challenge to the “fatalistic teaching” (Misiaszek 2020b, 617; 2020a, 34-35) condemned by Greg Misiaszek. This widespread approach, often rooted in a misunderstanding of the gravity of the climate crisis, tends to normalize environmental oppression as an essential and inescapable fate. Against this paralysis, the laboratory adopts Paulo Freire’s foundational idea that “ending all oppression is possible” (Misiaszek 2020b, 617). While humans are the only living beings capable of self-reflection and thus “able to dream of possible utopias” (Freire 2000 in Misiaszek 2020b, 617; 2020a, 34-35), bell hooks (2010, 7-8 in Short, Ensweiler, and Misiaszek 2025, 2) argues that children today “are organically predisposed to be critical thinkers but unfortunately they encounter a world that seeks to educate them for conformity and obedience only”. Consequently, following the model of Paulo Freire, the aim is to shift instruction from a passive “banking-education” (Misiaszek 2020a, 29) – a model focused on the mere reception

of information delivered by the “sole voice and unbounded authority [of] the teacher” (29) – into a transformative praxis. By combining critical thinking with hands-on action, the laboratory seeks to restore the youth’s agency and their capacity to imagine alternative futures (Misiaszek 2020b, 617).

Currently, modern education often teaches students *about* nature through “manipulating” and “mediating” (Hung 2017, 45) experiences, incentivizing remote encounters via technological means rather than direct contact. This abstraction applies to climate change as well: often presented as an unmanageable global phenomenon, it generates what David Sobel defines as “ecophobia” (45) – a paralyzing fear of distant disasters that children can neither influence nor understand (45). To mitigate this sentiment, the laboratory moves from a generic environmental education model to a more situated *Place-Based* form of education: “a pedagogical approach that emphasizes the connection between a learning process and the physical place in which teachers and students are located” (Yemini et al. 2025, 640). In this way, the boundaries between classroom and lagoon crumble, and Venice ceases to be a commercialized carcass to become a living ‘text’ that students must learn how to ‘read’ and ‘write’. The methodology is articulated in five phases, structured as following: firstly, there is a phase dedicated to the extensive reading and analysis of the three chosen novels; thereafter, three phases will follow, dedicated to the techniques of mapping, intergenerational dialogue, and digital storytelling; finally, the last phase involves a public restitution of the obtained results to the local community.

To cure future blindness and translate the diagnostic analysis of the novels into an operative curriculum, the laboratory’s specific objectives are structured on three levels:

- 1) *Cognitive Level (The City of Ember goal)*: to develop *infrastructural literacy*, enabling students to understand the urban structures (energy, MOSE, waste) that often stay hidden to the community;
- 2) *Emotive Level (The High House goal)*: to transform eco-anxiety and eco-grief into practices of stewardship, recovering the values of maintenance and ordinary care over the sentiment of emergency;
- 3) *Relational Level (Wilder Girls goal)*: to build a resilient community that includes more-than-human subjects, promoting a new ecological citizenship.

7.1) State of the Art

In the last decade, young adult dystopian cli-fi has become increasingly dominant in literary studies (Johns-Putra 2016, 266). Blanche Verlie (2022), among other scholars, notes that stories cover a powerful role “in cultivating engagement with climate change” (90), while “enable[ing] us to empathise with others’ experiences and help us become more considerate of different perspectives” (91). In fact, these type of narratives challenges young readers to reflect upon “current social and political issues, and engage in debates about the relationship between people, technology, and nature” (Thompson 2020, 4); and, in doing so, they stir up a whole range of “eco-emotions” (Wu et al. 2025). Empirical research has demonstrated that “people worry a lot about climate change, not least young people” (Ojala 2023, 1110), who often feel helpless and “that they cannot influence the climate problem” (1111); however, studies about “how young people cope with emotions related to climate change” are still few (Ojala 2012, 537). Research conducted in 2012 by Maria Ojala on this topic observed that children usually respond more with “distancing to cope with worry” and use “less positive appraisal and instead place[...] trust in researchers and technological development” (537) than older participants in the study. In order to contrast this tendency to emotionally take distances, speculative literature functions as a safe space where youth can encounter catastrophic scenarios in a sheltered way. It favors critical thinking and “broadening discussions regarding future sustainability” (Leavenworth and Manni 2020, 727) without actually being physically crushed by the threat.

This dynamic echoes the idea of the ecopsychologist Dodds (2021 in Lahtinen and Löytty , 83), who believes that humans usually “react optimally only to quick and visible threats”. Therefore, he suggests “promote[ing] the kind of anxiety that motivates to change one’s own behaviour” (83). By transforming abstract scientific data into an emotional and sensorial experience, literature shifts the climate crisis to a low-level construal, making it more proximate and tangible (Schneider-Mayerson 2018, 483).

Consequently, there are multiple qualitative and theoretical findings – textual analysis, qualitative studies, and theses – which demonstrates that complex emotions like eco-anxiety and eco-grief that arise from this type of reading no longer constitute mere obstacles to surpass; rather, they become catalysts necessary to break inertia and denial. Many scholars have noted that, if adequately processed, ecological degradation can transform into a form of productive ‘meeting’. As Timothy C. Baker (2022, 62 in Carlill 2019, 17)

observes, “distress can, itself, be a form of encounter” that drives readers towards the desire to comprehend and actively take action. Furthermore, Brandon McWilliams suggests that by being exposed to stories of collective success, youth’s feelings of isolation will diminish while their perception that “a group can act together to make a difference” (McWilliams 2024, 9) increases, ultimately “improving the translation of climate concern into climate action” (9).

Generally speaking, a separation exists between a high level of knowledge of a problem and a low level corresponding action – it is a phenomenon known as the “hope gap” (McWilliams 2024, 12). Literature can help fill this gap not by utilizing abstract “ecomodernist technological solutions” (Ballard, Roche and Welsh 2025, 50), but by showing that “openness to radical adaptation and communitarianism will be paramount to survival” (47). Rebecca McWilliams Ojala Ballard, Lee Roche, and Elena Welsh (2025, 48) suggest that the investigations that climate fictions conduct regarding “community are among the genre’s most valuable contributions to broader interdisciplinary and extra-academic climate discourse”.

As similarly discussed in Chapter Two – in the section regarding ecopedagogy (2.4), the state of the art here also suggests that traditional ‘top-down’ environmental education is insufficient. It is necessary to adopt a transformative praxis that combines critical thinking and practical action within the local territory. By adopting this approach, Giroux (2010 in Short et al. 2025, 7) suggests that students will have new opportunities “to move beyond the immediate confines of their singular lived experiences and participate in a dialogue through which they may imagine a future that will not reproduce the present”. Consequently, YAD cli-fi not only functions as a way to escape reality, but represents “an important alternative future-making tool when it is recognized as a form of cultural modelling” (Bartosch and Hoydis 2025, 2). It allows young people to ‘simulate’ future scenarios, becoming the cognitive scaffolding required to develop agency in the real world.

Some experimental “environmentally themed programming” (Wu et al. 2025, 1) shows proof that literature, when integrated into project-based learning, can transform negative eco-emotions and imagination into empowerment and concrete action, promoting “resilience and proactive engagement among youth” (1). Milkoreit (2017) and Wapner (2016) believe that society’s imagination usually fails on two fronts: in “comprehend[ing] the severity of climate change risks and [...] [in] envision[ing] pathways toward desirable futures” (Reynante et al. 2025, 2). Over the years, many scholars have claimed that “humanity needs new climate imaginaries in the form of stories that engage with emotions,

[...] [stories] which foster a sense of transformative agency” (5). Therefore, Randon Reynate, Nicole M. Ardoin, and Roy Pea (2025, 2) tested this theory by “design[ing] a learning experience to engage U.S. youth in constructing new climate imaginaries”, significantly contributing to climate change education and successfully supporting students in envisioning more sustainable imaginaries of the future (11). However, longitudinal studies that significantly monitor over time the domino effect of literature on eco-anxiety, and, consequently, of educational interventions on the measurable increase of active citizenship are still missing.

Ultimately, it has been seen that education can participate in increasing eco-emotions when teaching about environmental threats (Ojala 2023, 1111). Therefore, many scholars have recently focused on analyzing the role of educators and “of emotions in learning processes about global sustainability problems” (Ojala 2023, 1109). It has been proved that the support of an educator that acts as a mediator or observer is fundamental for transforming emotions, like sadness or rage, into the motivation to actively engage and search for solutions (Leavenworth and Manni 2020, 737). Maria Ojala (2023) – echoing Freire’s educational theory of *critical consciousness*, Boler’s “pedagogy of discomfort”, and Amsler’s “critical affective pedagogy” (1113) – suggests that, when teaching about climate change and other global issues, educators should “take emotions into account” (1109). And, they should do so by applying the concept of “critical emotional awareness (CEA)” (1110), which combines “insights from emotion research and critical social science” (1113). Furthermore, she expresses the importance for teachers to “acquire research based knowledge” (1114) on how to validate and respond to students’ emotions. In accordance with this idea, Panu Pihkala (2020, 1) suggests that “educators should first practice self-reflection about eco-anxiety after which they have many possibilities to help their audiences to develop emotional resilience”. Therefore, embracing Verlie’s (2022 in Pihkala 2020, 14) suggestion of “learning to live-with climate change”, Pihkala encourages educators to “use the frameworks of resilience and adaptation” (15) to achieve the goal of “meaning-focused coping” (16). Finally, he believes that educators, alongside speculative fiction, are able to offer students a safe space where they can validate their complex emotions, develop emotional skills and generally “increase resilience in the long run” (25).

7.2) Objectives: Countering Future Blindness and Re-igniting Ecological Imagination

The primary objective of the laboratory is to counter youth's future blindness, understood as the inability to imagine alternatives to the extractive present that consumes the planet. To overcome this fatalism, the project adopts Freire's model of critical ecopedagogy, turning passive education into active transformative praxis, where reflection and action are combined to re-inhabit the territory (Misiaszek 2020a, 29). The aim is to move beyond basic environmental literacy – limited at transmitting sterile scientific notions – to foster the critical and political ecoliteracy theorized by Richard Kahn and Greta Gaard, aimed at developing a “more just, democratic and sustainable planetary civilization” (Kahn 2008 in Gaard 2009, 326).

Subsequently, students will proceed to deconstruct the “tourist monoculture” (Cristiano and Gonella 2020, 2) model and examine Venice as more than a mere economic territory: as a complex and vulnerable system that is being socially and ecologically depleted. The necropolitical lens of Mbembe will be applied to analyze the city, with the goal of educating youth about questioning their territory's power dynamics. Through this process, students will gain critical literacy and transform into critical subjects, more aware and resilient.

Following Greg Misiaszek's framework of “locally-constructed environmental pedagogies” (Misiaszek 2020b, 620), the laboratory operates on two interconnected temporal and spatial axes: *deepening* and *widening* (Misiaszek 2020a, 3). The research begins from the local context of the lagoon (deepening) to root knowledge in a somatic, lived experience. Students investigate ‘invisible infrastructures’, such as the MOSE, getting a deeper understanding of their technical functioning to avoid the ‘blackout’ of vernacular competency (Turner 2025). Once the local reality is understood, the focus expands (widening) – “ranging from the Self to local, to national, to global, to the planetary” (Misiaszek 2020a, 2) – to include the broader dynamics of the Anthropocene. Venice thus ceases to be an isolated case and becomes a diagnostic instrument to read global injustice and the slow violence of climate change that disproportionately affects the most vulnerable territories. This process reveals how “daily life” (Misiaszek 2020b, 620) actions in the lagoon are intrinsically linked to planetary stability.

The ultimate goal of this laboratory is the formation of an ecological citizenship, where students become aware of their active role “in maintaining and caring for planet earth” (Fauzi, Fitriasari, and Muthaqin 2021, 555) and recognize themselves as members of a more-than-human community. Drawing inspiration from the concepts of trans-corporeality and of symbiotic agency previously analyzed in Rory Power's novel, students learn that protecting

the lagoon means protecting themselves as well, given their biological interconnection with the environment (Alaimo 2010a, 24). Hence, the goal is to transform these new planetary citizens – who recognize their duty not only towards their own kind but also towards the entire “multispecies agglomerations” (Nadal and Peers 2022, 8) of the Lagoon – fostering an ethic of care that challenges the currently prevailing predatory logic (Misiaszek 2020a, 23).

7.3) Methodology: a Toolkit For the ‘Anthropocene Child’

This section delineates the methodological path of the laboratory, conceived as a personal ‘toolkit’ for venetian youth, enabling them to learn what is inside their city’s ‘black box’ and how to use it in their daily life. Consequently, this toolkit transforms disempowerment into situated agency, using narratives and local research as drivers of change. Crucially, given the involvement of minors and the intergenerational nature of the participants, this laboratory presents some specific ethical problems. The methodological framework is designed to prioritize protection, respect, safety and wellbeing of all the participants involved (Iphofen 2021, 4). In particular, close attention will be paid to data privacy and informed consent – involving students, their legal guardians, and the other adult participants – throughout every step of the project, that will therefore remain flexible. Finally, during the whole laboratory, the educator will cover the role of a facilitator, rather than knowledge producer, and will be helped by a researcher that will mediate the transition from the emotive impact of literature to hands-on activities. As a result of this participatory research, youth will become co-creators of knowledge, and there will be a “shorten[ing of] the communicative distance between research activity and real-world activity, between researcher and researched” (Foth and Axup 2006, 93).

Phase 1: Reading and Analysis

Following Paulo Freire’s principle, learning how to “read and reread the world” (Misiaszek 2020a, 26) anticipates and provides information about the “reading of text” (26). Ecopedagogy is used by critical literature not merely as a form of evasion, but as an amplifier of “the localization of the individual identities and lived experience within social relations” (Haring 2024, 301). It is the critical instrument to unmask the hidden politics causing environmental oppression, and to “teach how to read Earth with the world, as a part of Earth” (Misiaszek 2020a, 1). As Henry Giroux claims, education must allow students to gain “ways

of thinking that push past” (Short, Ensweiler, and Misiaszek 2025, 2) the boundaries of their own lived experiences, to imagine possible alternative futures that do not perpetrate modern injustices. Therefore, the first phase of this project will focus on extensive reading of the three chosen texts: *The City of Ember* by Jeanne DuPrau, *The High House: A Novel* by Jessie Greengrass, and *Wilder Girls* by Rory Power. Students will be divided into three groups, each focusing on the “close reading” (Haring 2024, 304) of one novel. The reading will be guided by a catalogue of pre-selected questions; and, at the end of each reading session, the three groups will work together to share their findings and answer a set of cross-cutting questions. This phase is expected to require at least two months, with one to two meetings per week.

Catalogue of questions:

Group 1: The City of Ember

- a) In the novel, citizens worship the Generator as if it was a divinity, but no one knows how to repair it when it breaks. Why do you think the Builders did not leave instruction to repair it, but only to leave the city?
- b) How would you describe the relationships between citizens and the technology keeping them alive?
- c) When the light of the city starts to fail, Mayor Cole asks people to keep calm while hiding in his bunker filled with resources. On the contrary, Doon Harrow investigates first hand the Pipeworks. How does Doon’s behaviour modify his perspective of the city compared to the other citizens that do not act as him?
- d) At the beginning of the story, everything is perfectly rationed. How do Ember social’s rules change when the light bulbs and other resources start to become scarce?
- e) Do you recognize any changes in the way people treat each other when they realize that resources are not infinite?

Group 2: Wilder Girls

- a) Hetty loses her eye, which turns into a new organ; while Byatt grows a new external spine. In the text, how are the girls describing these mutations? Are these horrible sicknesses that need to be cured? Are they normal components of their new bodies?
- b) The Navy surrounds the island of Raxter and promises the girls a cure that does not exist, killing whoever tries to escape. According to the Navy’s logic described in the book, who are they actually protecting? The girls inside or the world outside?

- c) Who decided that Raxter's girls are sacrificable?
- d) Usually books describe nature as a lifeless background. In *Wilder Girls*, the trees and the wildlife are described as organisms with agency. Can you locate within the text the verbs used to describe nature?
- e) Based on the descriptions within the text, what is the role of humans? And, how do they relate with their environment?

Group 3: The High House

- a) Francesca builds the High House as an ark to save her children. However, in the village where the house is located there are other people in difficult situations. Does the text explicitly explain why Francesca decided to not save the other inhabitants of the village?
- b) What is the logic behind her choice, if any?
- c) Francesca stores in the house a multitude of resources (like seeds, food, books and other useful objects); while Grandy teaches Pauly and Caro how to take care of the garden and manage daily life. When disaster hits, which type of heredity will prove to be more useful for the children? Is it the accumulated objects or the new routines learned from Grandy?
- d) Pauly and Caro survive the catastrophe, are now safe and have food. Nonetheless, the author describes their life as melancholic and 'stopped in time'. Can you locate the description of their days in the High House? How do they feel? Do they look happy to have been saved? Do they feel guilty?
- e) What is missing in the High House that the world before the collapse had?

Cross-cutting questions:

- a) The three books have in common that they present the protagonists in closed, limited spaces: Ember is surrounded by darkness, Raxter by water and a fence, and the High House by rising water level. When in the story these boundaries cease to be perceived as 'protective' and become to be seen as a trap? Is there a specific event that makes their perception change?
- b) How do the characters imagine the world 'outside' before they see it? Do their imagination match the reality that they find or are they disappointed?
- c) The adults and authorities presented in the books lie or omit the truth, not always with bad intentions. According to the texts, why do they do this? Is it to avoid panic, to offer

protection or to keep power? Can you locate within the three novels sentences that justify these lies?

- d) What is the value of written knowledge (instructions, books, scientific reports) in these three worlds? Does it save lives? Is it useful in circumstances where practical emergencies must be quickly handled?
- e) What is the fundamental difference between characters who wait for external help and characters who decide to act themselves? What happens that makes them take action?
- f) In the High House and on Raxter, the protagonists remember how the world was before the disaster. In Ember, nobody remembers a world before. Who suffers the most? Is it who remembers what has been lost or who does not even know what is missing?
- g) Do objects have different values in the three texts? If you have to make a ranking of the most precious objects presented in the texts, which one would you choose as first place?
- h) All the three novels have an open ending. In your opinion, Why? What are the authors asking you to imagine?

The goal with these questions “is to stimulate critical engagement with the literary text by provoking the readers to look closely and adapt their reading strategies to find clues on how the narrative structure and the protagonists act” (Haring 2024, 305). Additionally, they lay the groundwork for indirectly introducing concepts – such as agency, necropolitics, vernacular care, and situated knowledge – that will be necessary to decode the reality of Venice. The example of Ember will be used to develop an investigative agency to look ‘under the surface’ of the MOSE, analyzing it as a technocratic infrastructure whose functions are ignored by citizens. Rory Power’s girls will help understand the topic of trans-corporeality, highlighting how accepting to live in the Lagoon means inhabiting a porous body constantly trading with Marghera’s pollution and microplastics. Finally, Francesca’s example will help transitioning from the safety planning model to the ordinary practice of care and maintenance. By using the “categorical structure of the questions” (305) the aim is to amplify “similarities and differences between the text and [students’] own experiences” to create educated imagination (Alsup 2010, 11 in Haring 2024, 305).

Phase 2: Educational Journey Mapping

Following the reading phase, “geo- and socio-spatial theoretical frameworks” (Marx 2022, 285) will be applied to give students more control over their stories through the method of “educational journey mapping” (286). Based on the distinction that Ruyu Hung (2017, 53)

makes between learning about, in and from nature, mapping becomes a tool to mark on paper the often imperceptible or normalized socio-environmental oppressions (Misiaszek 2020a, 4). Students are now asked to map the “seen-but-unseen ‘dystopian underbelly of the city’” (Goldfischer 2020, 28): the erosion of the *barene* caused by wave motion, the depopulation of residents due to “tourist monoculture” (Cristiano and Gonella 2020, 2), and the lagoon’s areas particularly contaminated by CECs. The lagoon is a silent teacher and the students will follow its guidance.

During this activity, students, working in small groups up to 4 people, will be given a prompt to create a ‘counter-map’ of Venice. Instead of marking tourist attractions, they will highlight with one color of their choice the ‘sacrifice zones’ of the city; then, using a different color, they will register on the same map places that are dear to them and spaces where residents conduct their life while trying to resist the expulsion force. Finally, they will be asked to connect the points by drawing a line that visually represents their daily movements between places marked by material and emotional loss, and spaces of resistance. This phase is expected to require two to three weeks.

Prompt:

We are used to seeing Venice through the eyes of tourists: a beautiful city frozen in time. However, we know that beneath the surface there is more. Today I ask you to look at the lagoon as Doon Harrow looks at the Pipelines, or like Raxter’s girls look at the forest: not as a background, but as a living organism that is trying to communicate something. Forget about map apps and tourist attractions. Today we will draw a new map of Venice: the invisible one, which is suffering, but still stays resilient.

You have in front of you a blank map of the lagoon. Together with your group you have to narrate two different stories, using two different colors.

Color A (sacrifice zone): Mark on the map the places where you see the slow violence we have previously discussed. Where are the *barene* disappearing due to wave motion? Where is the most polluted water of the territory? Where are the most tourist houses? Where do you think the city has turned into a commercialized carcass?

Color B (spaces of resistance): Mark on the map the places where you feel at *home*.

Do you have any secret spots that you would like to protect? Where do you still see children playing or non-touristy shops?

Once you are finished, connect the ‘dots’ with a line that represents your daily paths.

Do not worry about being precise. Also, a map is not only made by lines. You can use key words, symbols, drawings, pictures, songs, sounds or phrases that you hear along the way, etc. Use your imagination! The lagoon is your silent guide, listen to it and translate on paper what she says.

Phase 3: Intergenerational Dialogue

This phase aims to recover cultural ecoliteracy and transform eco-grief into hope through intergenerational dialogue, drawing on strategies of resilience such as: “resisting assimilation, strengthening community, developing appropriate technologies, and organizing collective knowledge” (Gaard 2008, 15). This phase might be implemented with the use of the intergenerational drawings method, so that “changes from generation to generation” (Derr 2018, 73) could be visually compared. Crucially, this whole intergenerational meeting process is extremely valuable to achieve the aimed transformation in youth, and activate a strategic alliance between young adults and elders, sparking a new or previously lost sense of community between people of different ages. Following Sonja Ehret’s (2025) methodology of “Research-based Learning”, a series of meetings – once a week, for a total of four weeks – will be organized to give students the opportunity to engage in dialogue with grandparents, fishermen, artisans – thus, figures – both from the middle and the third generation – that are metaphorically like Grandy, and could offer a positive support to the laboratory. The objectives of these meeting are to retrieve the “tacit knowledge” (Ehret 2025, 25) – “responsible for deep learning” (28) – these figures possess from years of lived experiences while demonstrating that not all adults are like the corrupt or paralyzed characters described in the novels, and to help youth recover vernacular knowledge. This phase will help them become active researchers of their own education instead of being passive recipients of taught stories. Through a maieutic approach that helps students “explore their potential by interacting with the outside environment to gain knowledge” (Muslikh, Rosidin, and Hidayat 2022, 1632), they will document artisanal techniques and stories about the lagoon’s ‘respite’ (Iovino 2017, 50) before the beginning of industrial acceleration. Moreover, they will learn that knowing how to read tides, repairing nets, or practicing the ethic of the *scomenzèra* (trial

and error) (Turner 2025) are not obsolete nostalgic practices, but sophisticated forms of resilience that technology cannot offer. Finally, this exchange is based on reciprocity: while elders pass down their knowledge and past stories, students will validate these experiences, transforming shared memories into a collective living archive.

Phase 4: Digital Storytelling

This fourth phase utilizes the technique of Digital Storytelling (DST) as a method for participatory action research, described by Joe Lambert (2006 in Derr 2018, 93) as an “approach to facilitate a wide range of stories including reflection, intergenerational connection, identity, and activism”. Here, it will connect Alan Maley’s “three ‘I’s: Inspiration, Information and Implementation” (Maley 2022, 349) with Nicole Haring’s (2024) “DigLit” methodology, similarly becoming a scaffolded process where critical thinking turns into communicative action. As Misiaszek (2020a, 30) claims, it is necessary to deconstruct hegemonic mediatic frameworks to create new ones that include marginalized voices. Therefore, during this phase, students will be asked to use their phones not for consumption, but to ‘re-write’ Venice as a “storied matter” (Iovino 2017, 4). Following the specific steps of scripting and storyboarding (Haring 2024, 295), students will have one month to transform their ‘counter-map’, created during Phase 2, into a visual narrative structure that can be “shared across time and space” (Derr 2018, 93). They will produce a short video of maximum 5 minutes; combining narrating voices, ambient sounds, music and images of their territory, they will create a personal narration with the information they collected during the previous three phases of the laboratory. Consequently, the digital device becomes an instrument to give voice to more-than-human elements – the rising water, the mud, the microorganisms, the barene – recognizing them as subjects with agency in one shared multispecies story. Ultimately, the goal is to create what Lauren Berlant defines as “intimate public” (Poletti 2011, 73): using digital storytelling not as a means to an end, but rather as an instrument to portray and reclaim eco-emotions while focusing on “affective connection[s] [...], which contributes to the rising prevalence of intimacy and affect as fundamental to the experience and construction of contemporary citizenship” (73). Therefore, since this method “requires a certain degree of training” (Derr 2018, 96), students will acquire new skills while hopefully becoming active citizens capable of recognizing “what is important to them as individual[s]” and “what is important to [...] [their] community” (67).

Phase 5: Public Restitution

This phase is the realization of ecological citizenship. Education is not a private process but a public, shared force that must act for planetary and social justice (Misiaszek 2020a, 24). Therefore, students will present their works to their school, community, families, and city leaders through a public exhibition or a digital event. Their ‘counter-maps’ videos will be exhibited, reclaiming a livable future beyond the myth of the ultimate technological solution. By demonstrating that the lagoon itself is a fellow citizen deserving of rights, youth transform from passive spectators to situated stewards capable of enacting changes.

7.4) Outcomes, Limitations, and Future Developments: From Unwilling Heirs to Situated Stewards

The objective of the laboratory is not to merely transmit ecological knowledge, but to foster true ontological and political transformation of the student. Consequently, the aim is to substitute the paralyzing anxiety emerging from Misiaszek’s (2020a, 6) “fatalistic teaching” with a Freirean process of “conscientização” (conscientization) (6). Through this transformative praxis, critical thinking and hands-on action are combined to restore to youth the ability to envision and build futures that do not reproduce the injustices of the present (Short, Ensweller, and Misiaszek 2025, 6).

The analysis of novels like *The High House* reveals a form of management of the crisis that, even when emotionally charged, stays confined in a logic of “experiential and individualized accounts of resilience” (Bartosch and Hoydis 2025, 5). Within these contexts, the “future-making” (1) is reduced to the mere maintenance of survival in a world already irreparably damaged. Conversely, the expected results of this laboratory are twofold:

1) From adaptation to endurance: instead of limiting themselves to surviving the Anthropocene, students learn Baraitser’s practice of endurance: a psychosocial adaptation that counters the stagnant productivity logic to keep relationships and spaces alive beyond one’s own limited temporal horizon (Turner 2025, 314).

2) From unwilling heirs to situated stewards: becoming stewards means that these new subjects are capable of inhabiting the crisis with a “gritty optimism” (McWilliams 2024, 21), recognizing that their agency is not isolated but part of a larger multispecies assemblage.

This laboratory is expected to provide students with the critical instruments necessary to decode and challenge neoliberal logics – often disguised as “development” (Misiaszek 2020b, 616) – that prioritize immediate profit and unlimited growth at the expense of planetary sustainability (616). Students would then acquire a cultural and political ecoliteracy that allows them to see how slow violence in the territory of Venice is the result of hegemonic power structures and “to engage in culturally appropriate forms of ecological politics” (Gaard 2009, 326). Through the recovery of resilient practices of vernacular knowledge and care, youth would learn to see the lagoon not as a musealized set, but as a ‘fellow citizen’ with its own rights, breaking the “‘vicious circle’ of tourist development in heritage cities” (Russo 2002, in Cristiano and Gonella 2020, 7). This approach – which goes beyond de Sousa Santos’s (2007 in Short, Ensweiler, and Misiaszek 2025, 7) “abyssal thinking” that divides types and ways of knowing – allows us to integrate scientific knowledge with the ancestral one, expanding opportunities for innovation and resilience.

Ultimately, the laboratory aspires to demonstrate that Venice’s survival is not to be found in the ‘ultimate technological solution’, but in the ability of its inhabitants “to adapt to the ecological niche of the place” (Fauzi, Fitriasari, and Muthaqin 2021, 555). Students emerge from this path no longer as spectators of ruins, but as architects of ruins – capable of transforming what Ann Kaplan (2016, 2 in Akyol 2020, 117) defines as globally induced “pretraumatic stress” into ordinary restorative actions. Within this context, hope ceases to be a comforting illusion and becomes praxis: the concrete practice of “making home of a broken world” (LeMenager 2017, 225-6 in Fuchs and Maierhofer 2024, 15), yet still capable of regenerating.

Nonetheless, there are some limitations that this laboratory may encounter. A major limitation regards the Place-Based Education nature of the laboratory. The results and the activities are closely connected to the sacrifice zone of Venice. This means that, while the proposal lays the foundation for a model of biological citizenship that can be directly applied to other threatened coastal realities, it might not be directly transferable to other contexts of non coastal cities or territories with different ecological difficulties. Another issue to take into consideration is the influence of age on emotive reactions: the results may vary depending on whether the participants are younger or older than the selected target of this project. Furthermore, even though YAD cli-fi can help enhance ecological imagination, literature alone cannot solve environmental issues. Consequently, another limitation stems from the possibility of generating a “didactic bias” (Bartosch and Hoydis 2025, 1): the idea that merely representing a problem can automatically lead to a collective curative action. In addition to

this, it is to consider that, even though the results will be successful, researchers suggest that the effects of literature on risk perception and agency tend to diminish over time, or to disappear after a few weeks (McWilliams 2024, 47). On the contrary, when it is not properly mediated, the exposure to dystopic stories, such as *Wilder Girls*, can become counter-productive, and can fuel anxiety rather than constructive motivation. Moreover, there are a series of logistical challenges to take into account: from the long timing required by the implementation of the place-based education, to the bureaucratic permits and the involvement of numerous actors – schools, teachers, elders, community. Finally, there are some ethical limitations as well. Given that some of the participants are minors, involving them in discussions regarding catastrophic futures requires constant attention to their psychological wellbeing and reiterating informed consent during the whole laboratory, also limiting, when necessary, the exhaustive treatment of certain topics in all their radical implications. In connection with this, a thorough assessment of the adequate infrastructures and specific training for the mediators will be required.

Looking to the future, this ecopedagogical model, developed for Venice, could be applied to other coastal sacrifice zones that suffer similar types of slow violence, widening from the local to the global (Misiaszek 2020a, 2). This scaling up would allow students from other territories to recognize their systemic vulnerabilities through the diagnostic lens of literature. Another possible future implementation might involve utilizing digital instruments for “eco-visualization” (Dean and Bertling 2020) and real time monitoring – such as apps that track high tides of contaminants levels, transforming this laboratory into a project of citizen science. This would allow youth to shift from processes of narrative reading to active data collection, strengthening their role as situated stewards. Furthermore, it would be interesting to monitor over time, through longitudinal studies, whether the exposure to YAD cli-fi and ecopedagogical praxis lead to behavioural changes in the long term, or whether they guide youth towards ‘climate jobs’ within the lagoon maintenance and restoration sectors (Turner 2025, 302). Finally, the laboratory might evolve in the future towards a form of narrative justice that would more deeply involve more-than-human subjects, promoting a biological citizenship where the protection of the ecosystem is perceived as a protection of the self, embracing Donna Haraway’s (2008 in Nadal and Peers 2022, 8) perspective of “becoming with” the environment.

8) Conclusion

This research originated from the urgency to comprehend how to contrast the future blindness affecting Venetian youth, a cohort immersed in a fragile ecosystem that physically embodies the harsh challenges of the Anthropocene. Even though it has not been possible to answer here all the questions of this research, the conducted analysis has demonstrated that the literary form of the young adult dystopian climate fiction novel, when integrated with a critical pedagogy rooted on Place-Based approaches and Participatory Research, does not represent solely a safe space within the imaginary, but acts as a fundamental diagnostic instrument to recover eco-political agency.

To answer the initial research question, it emerged that these types of narratives are capable of ‘building’ a cognitive and emotional scaffolder, necessary to transform the perception of the crisis from an abstract and distant happening to a concretely lived reality, modifiable through collective actions. Dystopian narratives, functioning as a simulative laboratory, allows youth to ‘inhabit’ collapse before it becomes a definitive certainty, training the ecological imagination necessary to navigate the ruins of the present (Leavenworth and Manni 2021).

The connective ‘thread’ passing through this thesis inextricably links the literary analysis with the ecopedagogical proposal through three different key categories, obtained from the analyzed novels. Firstly, *The City of Ember* has contributed with the concept of infrastructural literacy: like Doon and Lina decoded the signals of their city’s dying Generator, Venetian youth are encouraged to look inside their local reality’s ‘black box’ of technocratic systems, such as the MOSE (Turner 2025), shifting from passive dependence to aware citizenship. Subsequently, the analysis of *The High House: A Novel* helped identify the practice of care and the concept of endurance as answers to affective paralysis and ecological grief, mostly affecting the Global North (Carlill 2019). Finally, *Wilder Girls* introduced Alaimo’s (2010) concept of trans-corporeality, revealing how the lagoon is not a mere backdrop; rather, as the transformed girls in the novel, it is a porous body interconnected with the biology of all her human and more-than-human inhabitants, who are required a symbiotic agency to survive within their mutated habitat. These categories helped build the base of the proposed ecological laboratory, favouring student’s metamorphosis from unwilling heirs into situated stewards, capable of taking action on the material ‘text’ of their territory.

The implications of this work extend to multiple levels. At the literal level, it has been demonstrated that YAD cli-fi is not a mere entertaining genre, but an actual narrative epistemology: a form of knowledge capable of giving a visual representation to the slow violence that science communicates with more difficulties to the general public. From a pedagogical perspective, this thesis suggests a replicable model — the ‘toolkit’ — that unifies the democratic potential of the technique of digital storytelling to the physicality of the socio-spatial mapping, breaking the boundaries of traditional “banking-education” (Misiaszek 2020a, 29). Socially, this research offers a counter-narrative for the city of Venice, taking it away from the status of ‘commercialized carcass’ to re-discover it as “storied matter” (Iovino 2017, 4), a living entity sustained by intergenerational alliance and regenerative memory.

It should be noted that this work is a theoretical proposal and that its primary limit lies in lacking an empirical phase that would allow a better evaluation of the effective reception by the students, and of the real logistic difficulties of such a project. Moreover, the results are influenced by the choice of a corpus of anglophone texts that might not reflect all the cultural nuances of the Italian lagoon's identity. For the future, this laboratory might be implemented and adapted to other coastal cities or sacrifice zones threatened by rising sea levels, testing the efficacy of the parallelism between dystopia and reality in different geographic contexts.

In conclusion, as the young protagonist of *Ember* teaches us: hope is a praxis. It is not a consolatory illusion, but rather the concrete action of throwing a message into darkness while waiting and hoping for someone to pick it up. Despite the heredity of a “broken world” (LeMenager 2017, 225-226 in Fuchs and Maierhofer 2024, 15), Venetian youth must not be condemned in remaining spectators of ruins. Instead, they can become architects of ruins, capable of transforming Anthropocene's “pretraumatic stress” (Kaplan 2016, 2 in Akyol 2020, 117) into an ordinary practice of care and resilience, re-building their city's future, and then widening it one ‘text’ after another.

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