

Generational Time and Multilinear Form in the Climate Change Novel

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Abstract

Drawing on New Formalism and econarratology, this essay considers the potential of narrative multilinearity in fostering new modes of thinking about generational relations in times of ecological crisis. The starting point is that climate change puts considerable pressure on the forms of generational thinking embedded in Western modernity. The multilinear novels I consider speak to this challenge on a formal level, by revisiting the traditional template of the ‘family saga’, with its multigenerational, temporally distributed structure. The article’s archive includes contemporary novels by James Bradley (*Clade*), Hanya Yanagihara (*To Paradise*), and Namwali Serpell (*The Old Drift*). In different ways and to different degrees, these works reimagine conventionally anthropocentric ideas of generation and kinship, opening them up to entanglements with the nonhuman.

Keywords: ecological crisis, econarratology, kinship, New Formalism, temporality

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Introduction

Climate change is, as philosopher Dale Jamieson puts it, ‘the largest collective action problem that humanity has ever faced, one that has both intra- and inter-generational dimensions’ (2014: 61). The effects of climate change are spatially as well as temporally distributed: scientific and societal debates on the ecological crisis frequently refer to scenarios predicting future impacts of, for example, rising temperatures or sea levels. The temporal scope of these predictions is such that they do not only concern individuals living in the present, but their descendants—potentially, for centuries, millennia, or even larger time scales, since greenhouse gas emissions and other anthropogenic processes are permanently reshaping the Earth’s climate and geological make-up. This means that facing up to climate change doesn’t only require developing our ‘sense of planet’, to use Ursula Heise’s (2008) phrase, but it also involves cultivating an ability to grasp and imagine global connections across geographic, national, and cultural boundaries. This kind of cosmopolitanism, which plays out mostly in spatial terms, must be complemented by awareness of the temporal ‘depth’ of the crisis: how it has its roots in past and present practices of capitalist extraction and colonial exploitation, and how it reaches into an uncertain future.

For social animals like us, the easiest way to imagine this temporality is as a succession of generations. Indeed, the temptation to frame the ecological crisis in relation to future generations is so strong that philosopher Samuel Schleffer’s book, titled rather broadly *Why Worry About Future Generations?*, identifies climate change as the ‘matter of public concern’ (2018: 12) that most straightforwardly raises the titular question. A combination of biological and cultural factors links present-day human beings to future generations. Biologically, sexual reproduction ensures the continuation of our species, and indeed the environmental movement has repeatedly mobilized the rhetoric of preserving the planet for our children in order to raise ecological awareness. Lee Edelman (2004) has influentially critiqued this discourse under the heading of ‘reproductive

futurism': that is, the tendency to align futurity with heteronormative assumptions or other dominant ways of understanding the human. Nicole Seymore describes this position as follows: 'concern for the future qua the planet *can only emerge, or emerges most effectively*, from white, heterosexual, familial reproductivity' (2013: 7).

However, generations are not only a biological construct but deeply influenced by culture. This is where the 'inter-generational dimensions' of the ecological crisis can be extricated from heteronormative models grounded in sexual reproduction. Shifting the focus from the biological grounding of the concept of generation to its cultural openness can go a long way towards addressing the pitfalls of reproductive futurism. After all, the ecological crisis is the product of a certain understanding of human-nonhuman relations, which views human beings as intrinsically different from (and superior to) other life forms. Notions of this kind are constructed and scaffolded by a variety of cultural practices, from education to media discourse and institutional structures. These practices, while clearly intergenerational in the sense that they involve individuals from multiple age groups, do not build on the link between parental and environmental care. The ecological crisis we face today is a product of Western modernity, which is predicated on notions of human mastery over the nonhuman world and also on faith in linear narratives of technological and scientific progress and economic growth.¹ By percolating into a vast range of cultural practices and discourses, these notions shape the outlook of current and future generations. Thus, transforming environmental attitudes entails far more than preserving the planet for *our* children; it requires a fundamental shift in the cultural assumptions handed down to future human beings, regardless of whether they are bound to us by kinship in the biological sense.

Of course, realizing this type of cultural change is a tall order. No single intervention, no matter how ambitious and vast in scale, can hope to make a difference, which is part of the reason why the link between pro-environmental action and parenthood, through its immediate emotional appeal, remains so tempting. But a renewed understanding of (future) generations is likely to play a central role in any attempt to counter the anthropocentric, extractive, and near-sighted outlook of Western modernity. This essay argues that the form of the contemporary novel speaks to these tensions inherent in the concept of generation, particularly its being poised between the biological and the cultural, but also between the human and the nonhuman. Drawing inspiration from the New Formalist method advanced by Caroline Levine (2015), I examine the potential of narrative multilinearity in fostering new modes of thinking about generations, modes that destabilize the link between sexual reproduction and environmental futurity. The novel thus becomes a springboard

¹ See, for instance, the arguments developed by Chakrabarty (2009) and Moore (2017).

for imagining what Kathleen Woodward (2020), in a seminal intervention in the field of ageing studies, has called ‘generational time’.

Taking her cue from a novel by Margaret Drabble (*The Dark Flood Rises* [2016]), Woodward outlines a convergence between ‘the fields of critical age studies and humanities studies of climate change’ (2020: 51). The focus of her discussion is on the idea of generational time, which she defines as follows: ‘Entailing two, three, and four generations, perhaps even more, generational time is our singular way of understanding future time, linking us in altogether meaningful ways to others whose futures we care about deeply’ (2020: 54). Generational time, from this perspective, is inherently *multigenerational*. Implicit in Woodward’s discussion of Drabble’s novel is the notion that literary narrative, through its excavation of characters’ inner lives, may be helpful in fleshing out the idea of generational time—that is, in lending it experiential (affective and imaginative) vividness. Yet Drabble’s novel is held back in its engagement with generational time by the way in which it foregrounds a single protagonist, an ageing woman who embodies the privilege and blind spots of the white middle class: to use again Woodward’s terminology, the protagonist’s ‘generational imagination’ is limited, and her attachment to her daughter downplays the threats posed by climate change (ironically, since her daughter is a climate scientist). Drabble is thus inviting her audiences to position themselves in opposition to the protagonist, reading against the grain of her inability to devote attention to generational time.

Other works of contemporary ‘climate fiction’ are more explicit in staging intergenerational concerns and tensions.² Jenny Offill’s *Weather* (2020), for instance, or many of Lauren Groff’s short stories (see, e.g., *Florida* [2018]) foreground characters who are struggling with the anxieties aroused by ecological uncertainty, where uncertainty is straightforwardly linked to the future wellbeing of the protagonists’ children.³ Here generational time is evoked directly, but it is embedded within a parental model of care that is, as observed by Adeline Johns-Putra (2019: 22), fundamentally limiting, since it folds into the biologically based, heteronormative futurity critiqued by Edelman.⁴ Instead of focusing on this thematic link between generations and parenthood, this article turns to a set of contemporary climate novels in which generational time is enacted formally through the adoption of a multilinear, multigenerational structure. I will suggest that this broad temporal span

² For more on the scope and definition of climate change fiction, see LeMenager (2017) and Adam Trexler’s (2015) discussion of the (related but broader) concept of ‘Anthropocene fiction’.

³ I write about contemporary fiction’s engagement with climate uncertainty in Caracciolo (2022), where I also offer readings of works by Groff and Offill.

⁴ See Johns-Putra (2019: 22): ‘parental care ethics as a moral outlook for the future, with its idealisation of care as an ethical disposition and its problematic identity biases, lays itself open to critique on several counts. Among other things, the exclusionary tendencies of identity politics and the parochialism and paternalism that undermine positions of care have the potential to lead to a narrow concept of posterity as genetic survivalism, that is, the privileging of one’s own legacy over others’.

represents an effective novelistic response to the generational challenges of climate change. The ‘family saga’ is the closest equivalent to this multigenerational structure, but as we will see my examples put significant pressure on the definition and meaning of family (and related concepts of kinship and generation). This formal operation promises to uncouple the imagination of futurity from a narrowly biological understanding; it also opens the door to a posthumanist way of thinking about kinship as blurring species boundaries.⁵ Not all of my examples are equally radical in this critique of reproductively grounded generational thinking, of course: James Bradley’s *Clade* (2015), for instance, mostly hints at the nonhuman on a thematic level, but the form of the novel remains tied to anthropocentric notions; my other case studies, Hanya Yanagihara’s *To Paradise* (2022) and Namwali Serpell’s *The Old Drift* (2019), go much farther in either defamiliarizing the family saga (in the former novel) or in blending formal devices and more-than-human perspectives on generational time (in the latter). Before turning to these works, however, I will further position my discussion vis-à-vis the fields of New Formalism and econarratology, and I will also introduce recent posthumanist work on the concept of kinship.

Narrative Multilinearity and Kinship Beyond the Human

One of the main takeaways of Caroline Levine’s New Formalism is that literary form matters: the formal choices adopted by writers are no mere embellishment but enter a dialogue with the forms that regulate social life, from hierarchical structures to models of temporal or spatial organization. Take, for example, Levine’s reading of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poem ‘The Young Queen’, which commemorates Queen Victoria’s accession to the British throne in 1837. Levine highlights the way in which poetic meter captures the convergence of the temporalities of public life, ‘a piling up of multiple institutional tempos that are necessarily superimposed at the moment of royal succession’ (2015: 79). Poetic form and the temporal configuration of social life are thus complexly intertwined.

However, as Levine acknowledges, this continuum of textual and extratextual forms isn’t limited to poetry. Narrative itself can be thought of as a macroform that ‘captures the experience of colliding forms’ and affords ‘careful attention to the ways in which forms come together, and to what happens when and after they meet’ (Levine 2015: 19). This insight wasn’t lost on scholars working within the field of econarratology. Spearheaded by Erin James and Eric Morel (2020), econarratology highlights the ecological significance of narrative form: how narrative strategies can

⁵ See also Sako and Falcus’s (2023) reading of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Klara and the Sun*, which shares many of my conceptual coordinates—particularly generational time and posthumanism—despite delivering a thematic analysis rather than a narratological one.

speak to debates on the environmental crisis and the concepts that underlie such debates—for instance, the distinction between human agents and supposedly inert matter. I have already alluded to the spatiotemporal distribution of the effects of climate change: asking how narrative may be able to encapsulate these effects within its formal workings is a central question for econarratology. A related concern has to do with what Monika Fludernik (1996: 13) calls the ‘anthropomorphic bias’ of storytelling—that is, its tendency to approach characters as human-like and gravitate towards human values and experiences. Does this bias imply that narrative is not only inevitably anthropomorphic, but anthropocentric? How can stories resist this bias and open themselves up to the nonhuman—not just thematically but formally?

In *Narrating the Mesh* (Caracciolo 2021), I engaged with these questions through a crossover of econarratology and New Formalism. My focus was on how narrative form may disrupt anthropocentrism by capturing three features of the climate crisis: how it straddles multiple scales of reality, how it foregrounds interdependence between human societies and nonhuman phenomena, and how it complicates the (normally human-scale) link between cause and effect. I also observed that narratives engaging with climate change tend to take a nonlinear form, which serves as a direct formal equivalent to the complexity of ecological processes. My discussion in the book doesn’t imply that narratives can completely do away with linearity, however. Indeed, since narrative involves temporal and causal sequentiality on a fundamental level, readers will always attempt to project a linear form onto the events told by a story. But such projections can be resisted or complicated by strategies that include the foregrounding of multiple characters or spatiotemporal settings, the adoption of counterintuitive loop-like patterns, and the use of coincidence as the main vector of narrative organization.⁶

Multilinearity, as I use the concept in this article, represents one way of problematizing linearity: it consists in the juxtaposition of story lines that remain separate in spatiotemporal terms (for instance because they are tied to different characters or groups of characters), but may converge periodically in the narrative. Any given multilinear plot is caught in a tension between what I have called distribution and focus (Caracciolo 2023b). The former refers to the spatiotemporal ‘spread’ of the narrative, how distant the story lines are within the narrative’s implicit chronology and spatiality (which may or may not reflect real-world history and geography). The further apart the story lines, the more narrative risks creating a merely episodic sequence with no clear arc or progression. Focus is what resists this centrifugal impulse and brings together the story lines *despite* their distancing: it is an overall organizing principle that lends coherence to the

⁶ I discuss the econarratological significance of the coincidence plot in Caracciolo (2023a), which examines divergent conceptions of probability in narrative theory and scientific thinking.

whole. Consider, for example, one of the most frequently cited environmental fictions of the last decade, Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018), which is a multilinear narrative staging characters who originate from different parts of the US: some of them converge in the novel's storyworlds, others never meet and are only connected thematically. Shannon Lambert has argued that Powers's thematic preoccupation with the connectedness of fungal networks in forests serves as a central analogy for understanding the characters' relations: 'events within Powers's story progress through connected yet dispersed character relations which leave the impression of something more vegetal, rhizomatic' (2021: 197). The analogy between human characters and the invisible organization of forests thus creates focus and coherence within Powers's multilinear structure.

However, multilinear narrative can also achieve focus through a different type of relationality, that of kinship (see, again, Caracciolo 2023b). Family relationships have of course been central to the novel since the rise of the genre in the eighteenth century. Ruth Perry, for instance, has argued that the early novel 'functioned to explore and work through the changing kinship arrangements which regulated domestic life and intergenerational relationships' (2004: 6). While this negotiation of kinship often takes place in thematic terms, the multilinear form can use family as the organizing principle of progression, for example by telling the lives of multiple characters, each of which constitutes a relatively independent story line. What brings these characters and story lines together is that they can all be traced to the same family (or families), across various generations. In the twentieth century, the combination of multilinearity and multigenerational focus has given rise to novels as diverse as Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* (1901), Gabriel Garcia Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), and Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976).

More recently, the form has gained traction within environmental or 'climate' fiction, and it is this type of multilinearity with a focus on kinship that I explore in the following pages. Beside the three novels I will discuss, Annie Proulx's *Barkskins* (2016) has been hailed as one of the most successful family sagas in contemporary environmental literature: it centers on two Frenchmen, Charles Duquet and René Sel, who move to North America in the late seventeenth century to work as indentured servants. The book's ten parts track Duquet's and Sel's descendants for more than three hundred years, with the final chapters of the novel extending into our century. These sections revolve around individual characters at specific points in time, so that their story lines almost take on an episodic quality. At the end of the book, two family trees display relations among the protagonists' numerous offspring, serving as a concrete visualization of Proulx's focus on kinship and allowing readers to more easily navigate the novel's numerous story lines. Environmental concerns enter *Barkskins* from multiple directions: Duquet owes his fortune to timber trade, a business driven by capitalist greed and the mindless exploitation of natural resources, while Sel's

descendants become involved in nature conservation projects. The structure is intricate and sprawling, but kinship is what keeps it together formally and thematically: not only is the book's multilinear set-up entirely derived from the two protagonists' offspring, but family is presented (as often in this multigenerational genre) as a background of common interests and ambitions that ripple across generations in sometimes predictable, sometimes surprising ways.

Compare this form to Powers's *The Overstory*, which shares with *Barkskins* a thematic preoccupation with plants and how they shape the fortunes of human societies. Both are multilinear novels, but while *The Overstory* foregrounds spatial distribution (i.e., its story lines are more separated in space than in time), *Barkskins* casts a far wider net in temporal terms. Proulx's novel can thus be said to enact, through its multilinear form, generational time in Woodward's (2020) sense: it affords a perspective on how the ecological crisis, which is strongly hinted at in the novel's final chapter (set in 2013), has its roots in colonialism and in the exploitation of the natural world (largely in the form of rampant deforestation). Yet *Barkskins* is less forceful than *The Overstory* in challenging the anthropomorphism of narrative form: the network of kinship that underpins Proulx's work is clearly geared towards human relations, with biological reproduction playing an important (albeit not exclusive) role in determining the novel's temporal span. By contrast, following Lambert's (2021) reading, *The Overstory* foregrounds thematically a nonhuman mode of connectedness (the mycorrhizal network connecting trees and fungi) and blends it with narrative form, particularly the human characters' intersubjective network, by way of analogy. This means that, on a formal level, Powers's novel is far more effective than *Barkskins* in countering the 'anthropomorphic bias' of narrative identified by Fludernik.

Nevertheless, the multilinear form and temporal distribution of *Barkskins* do seem to offer a promising point of departure for an exploration of generational time and its implication not just in the *past* of the ecological crisis but in its uncertain futurity. How can the contemporary novel combine a Proulx-style focus on the temporality of kinship with the opening up of narrative form to the nonhuman we find in *The Overstory*? The answer I will offer in the following pages, through my reading of works by Bradley, Yanagihara, and Serpell, is simple: to speak to the generational time of the ecological crisis and its planetary stakes, the novel must move beyond an anthropocentric way of conceptualizing family itself. Thus, all my case studies question a conventional understanding of family (and related concepts of kinship and generation) by shifting the focus from a species-specific view grounded in reproduction to a broader, more open-ended understanding of these ideas. In doing so, they approach thematically and integrate formally the more-than-human conception of kinship that grows out of posthumanist theory (although, as we will see, they do so to different degrees).

A seminal articulation of posthuman kinship can be found in Donna Haraway's work. Haraway's goal is to make "kin" mean something other/more than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy. The gently defamiliarizing move might seem for a while to be just a mistake, but then (with luck) appear as correct all along. Kin-making is making persons, not necessarily as individuals or as humans' (2015: 161). The notion of kinship is thus stretched to include relations that cannot be mapped out in genealogical terms and would resist simple visualizations like the family trees that close Proulx's novel. Instead, kinship becomes uncoupled from human reproduction and permeable to encounters with the more-than-human. This doesn't mean that kinship in Haraway's sense has nothing to do with biology: on the contrary, her suggestion that 'all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense' (2015: 162) implies recognition of our common evolutionary history and of the mortality we share with nonhuman animals. Deborah Bird Rose, another posthuman-oriented theorist, argues that the extended notion of kinship 'situates us [human beings] here on Earth, and asserts that we are not alone in time or place: we are at home where our kind of life (Earth life) came into being, and we are members of entangled generations of Earth life, generations that succeed each other in time and place' (2011: 64). The word 'generations' is here used in a non-species-specific sense, to highlight the permutations of life in evolutionary time. Drawing on her fieldwork in Aboriginal Australia, for example, Rose explains that one of her informants 'told long, fabulous stories about shared kinship: about how dogs and humans have a common origin and destiny' (2011: 17). While grounded in evolutionary history, this posthuman understanding of kinship also reshuffles the cultural meaning of family, in that it presents kinship as a form of affective relationality that is not bound to stable categories (humanness, parenthood, lineage, and so on).

Of course, as a human practice, narrative (and particularly narrative circulating in a Western context) cannot completely extricate itself from the human model of kinship that is foregrounded by Proulx's book. But it can defamiliarize this model in various ways, and in doing so it can map its multilinear form onto a posthumanist understanding. I position my three case studies in order of increasing distance from the conventional templates of the family saga, which tend to presuppose an anthropocentric understanding of kinship based on sexual reproduction.⁷ All of these novels combine multilinear form with an exploration of temporality that is open to the imagination of human-nonhuman entanglement.

⁷ By 'templates', I mean recurring and culturally circulating narrative structures. For more on this metaphor, see Herman and Vervaeck (2017: 609).

From Family to *Clade*

My first example is *Clade* by Australian writer James Bradley. Compared to Proulx's *Barkskins*, the temporal distribution of *Clade* is more compact, spanning three generations and a few decades rather than centuries. The multilinear structure consists of self-contained chapters and provides none of the paratextual guidance one finds in the Proulx novels (not only the aforementioned family trees, but also the explicit dating of the book's parts). In *Clade*, by contrast, it is up to the reader to fill in the gaps between the chapters and work out the rough chronology of the events. Nevertheless, kinship provides focus for the multilinear set-up. The starting point of the novel's family tree is the relationship between Adam (a climate scientist) and Ellie (an artist): after six years of relationship, they decide to have their first child, but a long and emotionally taxing series of fertility treatment proves necessary.

Sexual reproduction is thus foregrounded from the outset, and so is the magnitude of the crisis that humanity is facing: the planet, we read early on, 'was on a collision course with disaster. In the United States and India floods covered millions of square kilometres, in Africa and Europe the heat was growing ever more intense, in Indonesia and Brazil and Malaysia the forests were burning, yet he [Adam] and Ellie were trying to have a baby' (2017: location 202). Chapter two skips forward a few years, when Adam and Ellie's baby—a girl named Summer—has finally arrived. With another temporal leap, chapter three starts with Ellie driving Summer to a beach house where they are welcomed by Ellie's stepmother, Maddie; the reader infers the news of Adam and Ellie's divorce, and through periodic flashbacks we are introduced to Ellie's father, Tom, who bought this beach house and died five years earlier. Also in a flashback, the reader is told about Maddie and Tom's son, Declan, who died of cancer at a young age, and whose childhood is again juxtaposed with the deepening ecological crisis: 'Absorbed in Declan they let their friends slide, instead spending more and more time down here alone. That was the year the real disasters began—megablizzards in North America, tornados in China, the first widespread methane ruptures in Siberia—and it seemed natural to try to shut them out, to concentrate on the fact that here and now they were safe, and had each other' (2017: location 568).

Reproduction is seen as refuge from disaster, a source of comfort and hope as the world's climate shows increasing signs of having reached a point of no return. The whole multigenerational structure of the novel reinforces this affective investment in family, and of course it cannot be a coincidence that the Biblical name of the first character we encounter, Adam, evokes patriarchal stability and continuity. But elsewhere in the novel this blind faith in reproduction is said to be part of the problem, bound up as it is with humanity's obliviousness to climate catastrophe. One of

Adam's colleagues remarks: 'We don't change because we don't believe in the problem, . . . at least not at the deep, intuitive level we need to. We can see it when it's in front of us, see what it means; we know we have to change. But as soon as we're away from it our old thinking reasserts itself, our desire to reproduce, to build power' (2017: location 209). That 'desire to reproduce' and thus 'build power' is experienced by both couples (Adam and Ellie, Tom and Maddie), and it is inscribed in the novel's multilinear form through its focus on kinship.

However, in other respects *Clade* resists and defamiliarizes the anthropocentric understanding of kinship that it displays so prominently through the configuration of the narrative. A first hint is provided by the title, which is also the title of the third chapter (the one starting with Ellie and Summer's arrival at the beach house). Curiously, the word 'clade' never occurs in the text of the novel: it denotes, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, 'a group of biological taxa (such as species) that includes all descendants of one common ancestor'.⁸ The word thus appears interchangeable with 'family', but it starts defamiliarizing the novel's multilinear form by positioning the human characters within a more-than-human, evolutionary pattern: the title suggests a zooming out in temporal scale, entangling the novel's three generations within a much longer, evolutionary history that *Clade* can only evoke obliquely, but that still complicates the seemingly anthropocentric focus on kinship.

This tendency to highlight continuities between the human characters' multigenerational collective and nonhuman assemblages is tied to the bee motif, which is introduced halfway through the novel but announced from the novel's beginning by the chapter separators, which picture a bee. After breaking up with Adam, Ellie moves to a new home in the country, where she meets a character named Amir, a migrant who works as a beekeeper. Increasingly fascinated by bees, Ellie plans a new artistic project around the insects, and here a preoccupation with human-nonhuman connectedness begins to emerge in the novel. As Amir explains in a conversation with Ellie, 'The first time they [the bees] landed on me, enveloped me, it was as if I was no longer simply me but part of them, as if they connected me to something that went beyond myself' (2017: location 1526). The way in which the bees 'envelop' the character suggests entanglement with the nonhuman, the kind of entanglement that Haraway and Rose express through a posthuman understanding of kinship. Later in the same chapter, Ellie wonders: 'Do individual bees have any conception of time, or is their existence simpler than that, their brief lives lived in the busy rush of the moment?' (2017: location 1652). Given the novel's embedding of human kinship within a more-than-human pattern (the shift from family to 'clade'), the reader may wonder whether this question might not apply to

⁸ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/clade>.

the ‘brief lives’ of the novel’s own human characters, seen from the vantage point of natural evolution.

Ellie’s fascination with bees thus offers a key to reading the novel as a multilinear narrative ambiguously poised between an anthropocentric understanding of generations and a notion of kinship that resonates with human-nonhuman entanglement. On the one hand, we have patriarchal descent from Adam, who is the first character readers encounter in the novel and whose death is announced in the final chapter. On the other hand, the interest in the bees’ nonhuman collective (which goes hand in hand with the biological language of ‘clade’) proves defamiliarizing through its putting into perspective the characters’ affective investment in family. The result of this tension is that the novel’s multilinear structure conveys a sense of generational time that is at least partially detached from anthropocentric notions. My next two case studies amplify this generational imagination of the more-than-human, but they do so by following two profoundly different routes: Yanagihara’s novel breaks with the template of the family saga by exploring multigenerational temporality in the absence of clear family relations between the characters; Serpell, for her part, adheres to human kinship as a structuring principle but disrupts it through intermezzos that hint at human societies’ connectedness with an insect species (not Bradley’s bees but mosquitoes) as our nonhuman kin.

Uncertain Kinship in *To Paradise*

The three parts of *To Paradise* take place in different centuries: the first book (‘Washington Square’) is set in the nineteenth century, the second book (‘Lipo-Wao-Nahele’) in the 1990s, whereas the final book (‘Zone Eight’) imagines a dystopian future ranging from the 2040s to 2093—a half century during which a number of pandemics reshape the US into a totalitarian society. The first part isn’t historical fiction in the strict sense, however: Yanagihara rewrites the end of the Civil War, with the US fracturing into a series of independent states; she also imagines a society—the Free States, where New York is located—in which gay marriage is not only legal but extremely common. The 1990s of the second book also depart from historical reality, albeit in subtler ways than the first part. This is the only book that takes place outside New York City, the titular Lipo-Wao-Nahele being a (fictional) location in Hawaii. The other two books are set entirely in New York City and revolve around a building on Washington Square, which is first owned by a wealthy family, the Binghamms (in book one); it is home to the protagonist of book two (an affluent lawyer); finally, it is partitioned into a series of apartments, including that of the protagonist of book three,

a young woman who develops Asperger's-like symptoms after taking an experimental drug used to treat one of the outbreaks.

The dystopian world of the third book is presented as the product of intersecting crises: exploitation at the hands of rich families such as the Binghams of book one, whose wealth is built on colonial practices including slavery; the eradication of Indigenous communities, whose languishing is foregrounded by book two; and last but not least the depletion of the Earth's ecosystems. This environmental dimension becomes particularly salient in book three, where the devastating pandemics are compounded by a sequence of environmental catastrophes: 'Two months ago, the fires; last month, the rains; this month, the floods' (2022: 653). The outbreaks themselves are linked to the ecological crisis: 'Zoonoses have been increasing in incidence every year for the past eighty years, and the reason is because more and more wild land has been developed, and animals have lost their habitats and have been forced to come into closer contact with humans than they were ever meant to' (2022: 477). As this final book makes explicit, *To Paradise* revolves around the collapse of democratic systems as a result of deep connections between forms of violence that are typically framed as separate in contemporary media discourse and culture: violence on marginalized groups, on Indigenous communities, and on the nonhuman environment.

The grandfather of the protagonist of book three, a character named Charles Griffith, is the clearest embodiment in the novel of this convergence of systems of oppression: a top scientist during one of the first pandemics of the twenty-first century, Charles becomes implicated in the government's hardline response, which gradually erodes democratic institutions (including the legalized gay marriage that the characters of book one had taken for granted). 'How far back do I have to go? How many decisions must I regret?' (2022: 576), wonders Charles as he acknowledges the central role he played in the dystopian transformation of US society. The novel embraces the same historical logic of going 'far back', but scales it up from individual to generational time as it highlights the many decisions and shortcomings that led to the totalitarian reality of the third book: the novel's multilinear structure is meant to capture the *longue durée* of systemic processes and their devastating effects on social and material reality.

Given this *longue durée*, one may reasonably expect *To Paradise* to adopt a multigenerational approach, and of course in a broad sense the novel does give shape to a generational time grounded in an alternative nineteenth-century past and reaching into an uncertain (but recognizably bleak) future. Nevertheless, the novel both cues and resists a reading in light of the family saga template evoked by *Barkskins* and *Clade*. Two family names keep popping up throughout the novel: the Binghams and the Griffiths. However, it is impossible to reconstruct a genealogy bringing together

the three books: the reader is tempted to establish family relations, figuring out for example if and how the Charles Bingham of the second book (who is of Hawaiian descent) is related to the affluent Binghams of the first book. When asked about his European-sounding last name, Charles explains that Bingham is ‘a missionary name. American missionaries started arriving in the islands in significant numbers in the early nineteenth century; a lot of them intermarried with the Hawaiians’ (2022: 199). His interlocutor, David Griffith, brings up a dormitory at Yale named Bingham Hall and asks ‘Is there any relation?’ while ‘already [assuming] there wasn’t’ (2022: 199). Charles replies vaguely ‘Yes—he’s an ancestor’ (2022: 199), but the conversation reaches a dead end. We infer that Charles may be related to the Binghams of book one, with kinship providing focus for the multilinear structure. However, the novel never confirms this hunch.

The same is true for the other family name that recurs throughout the novel, the Griffiths. A character named Charles Griffith makes an appearance in book one: he proposes to the protagonist (David Bingham) but he is turned down. The David Griffith of book two is plausibly related to this other Griffith, but we never know for sure. In book three, we discover that the protagonist’s complete name is Charlie Bingham-Griffith, but the first half of the name was ‘edited out of existence’ (2022: 575). This revelation positions Charlie as the first figure bringing together the novel’s two families, but it also challenges a reproductive understanding of generations. Charlie is the adopted daughter of Nathaniel Bingham, not his biological offspring, and her birth is linked by Charlie’s grandfather to questions analogous to those we have seen emerge in *Clade*: ‘It takes a special kind of cruelty to make a baby now, knowing that the world it’ll inhabit and inherit will be dirty and diseased and unjust and difficult. So why would you? What kind of respect for life is that?’ (2022: 556). Even more importantly, though, blood relations between the Binghams and the Griffiths remain shrouded in uncertainty: it is impossible for the reader to establish a family tree of the kind we find at the end of Proulx’s *Barkskins*.

Instead, the recurrence of the same names (including the same first names, David, Charles, and Nathaniel) across the novel creates a disorienting impression: it activates the narrative scripts of a family saga but also stubbornly refuse to crystallize into one. The hierarchical progression of the family tree feeds instead into a sense of stagnation and ineluctability, as if history was bound to repeat itself. Yanagihara’s alternative history experiment in book one also results in a twenty-first century that is eerily (and dramatically) reminiscent of the crises we are experiencing today, suggesting that no historical intervention could have stopped the violence inherent in the capitalist system.

The notion of kinship that arises from the novel is thus open, ambiguous, and uncoupled not only from any reproductive model but also from the evolutionary perspective entertained by

Clade. However, the nonhuman still plays an important role in Yanagihara's novel: in the final book in particular, Charlie's job as a laboratory technician involves manipulating mouse embryos, which the scientists refer to humorously as 'pinkies'. It is not a coincidence that the normally emotionless Charlie expresses 'love' for the pinkies: "I love the pinkies, too", I said, and as I did, I realized that it was true. I did love the pinkies. They were so fragile and their lives had been so short; they were poor, unformed things, and had been created only to die and be pulled apart and examined, and then they were incinerated and forgotten' (2022: 516). This acknowledgment of care across the human-nonhuman divide—a care made more poignant by the embryos' single-use instrumentality—expands the circle of kinship at the heart of the novel. In the final pages, too, a nonhuman perspective comes to the fore as Charlie's grandfather, who is about to be executed, imagines coming 'back to earth someday as a vulture, a harpy, a giant microbe-stuffed bat, some kind of shrieking beast with rubbery wings who flies over scorched lands' (2022: 704). This image recalls Charlie's attachment to her nonhuman embryos, but it further enriches and complicates the more-than-human kinship envisioned by the novel. As humanity faces existential threats from multiple directions, the bird's eye perspective introduces affective distance from the bleakness of generational time.

Voicing the Swarm in *The Old Drift*

The paratext of Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift* is unambiguous in framing the novel as a family saga. After the epigraph (from the *Aeneid*), a family tree displays the descendants of three characters—Percy, N'gulube, and Giovanna—and also provides their dates of birth, which span more than a century, from Percy's 1873 to an anonymous 'boy' born in 2024. Like Charlie in *To Paradise*, this boy brings together the three families. If we turn the page, we encounter a table of contents that is neatly divided into three parts, titled 'The Grandmothers', 'The Mothers', and 'The Children'. This multigenerational set-up allows Serpell to paint a rich portrait of Zambia under British rule and later as an independent nation haunted by its colonial past. With the twenty-first century, the narrative enters Africanfuturist territory as one of the protagonists, Joseph, designs AI-controlled drones that are modeled after a swarm of mosquitoes. Not only is Zambia's history situated within a multigenerational time scale, but it is also placed in a global context: of the three families staged by the novel, one is of African descent, the other two originate in Britain and Italy, with the construction of the Kariba Dam on the Zambezi River serving as the catalyst for the characters' relocation to present-day Zambia. The titular Old Drift is a small settlement on the Zambezi River visited in the novel's first chapter by the photographer Percy Clark, the Percy of

the family tree. The Old Drift, later renamed Livingstone, also happens to be near the site chosen for Kariba Dam.

However, in the course of the novel the word ‘drift’ takes on more complex meanings. To fully unpack these meanings, we need to consider the italicized chapter intermezzos, which undercut any reading of Serpell’s novel as a conventional family saga. In these sections, a nonhuman voice enters the novel and significantly complicates the focus on human kinship. It is the voice of a swarm of mosquitoes, although the last of these italicized sections blends the insects with the insect-like drones created by Joseph, the Moskeetoze. The result is that the ‘we’ of these intermezzos fluctuates ambiguously between the animal and the technological, echoing contemporary anxieties on the possibilities (and dangers) of AI. This markedly nonhuman ‘we’ expresses itself in allusive, alliterative, and pun-rich prose, which reads very differently from the more realist style of the chapters. This collective voice serves as a counterpoint to the novel’s multigenerational narrative, providing commentary on the human characters’ decisions—along the lines of the chorus in classical Greek theater, but with more ironic overtones. We read on the novel’s first page: ‘Who are we? Thin troubadours, the bare ruinous choir, a chorus of gossipy mites. Uncanny the singing that comes from certain husks. Neither gods nor ghosts nor spirits nor sprites, we’re the effect of an elementary principle: with enough time, a swarm will evolve a conscience’ (2019: 19). The mosquitoes’ playful monologue originates from this collective ‘conscience’; this is also where the concept of ‘drift’ is renegotiated by the novel. One of the interludes states that ‘To err is human, you say with great sadness. But we thinfal [sic] singers give praise! To the drift, the diversion, that motion of motions! Obey the law of the flaw!’ (2019: 545). The idea of drifting thus becomes associated with chance and deviation (the Lucretian concept of ‘clinamen’ is referenced on the same page): from a human perspective, these diversions are mere errors, a failure of goal-directed action, but the mosquitoes have learned how to use such deviations to their advantage. The novel’s interest in disease also comes into play: the idea of ‘drift’ is further associated with the pathogens carried by mosquitoes, which keep finding ways of eluding the human immune system through genetic variations.

By becoming host to these random mutations, the mosquitoes exert secret control over human history: ‘Reckon the wars, how a battleground festers: the British armies in the American South, the Japanese in the Pacific. Even the fall of the Roman Empire was due in part to our diseases’ (2019: 486). The comings and goings of human generations are thus subject to ‘errors’ that can prove disastrous for human communities (including the characters of this novel), but also ensure the mosquitoes’ thriving. The rigidity of human plans and desires is repeatedly opposed to the swarm’s adaptability as the mosquitoes mediate between the microscopic world of viruses and

human-scale history. The playfulness of the mosquitoes' language serves as a stylistic stand-in for their ability to exist within the cracks of the anthropocentric world—dismissed as a nuisance (or, at worst, a carrier of dangerous diseases) but nevertheless capable of surviving and evolving. The revelation that the mosquitoes may be intelligent drones in the final intermezzo deepens this adaptability motif, suggesting that the 'we' that readers have linked to insects throughout the novel transcends the animal kingdom and blends with technology.⁹ As a nonhuman intelligence, this technologically augmented swarm is also capable of surviving a disaster that the novel ambiguously describes under the heading of 'The Change', an event that bears more than a passing resemblance to the climate crisis: as the last swarm-narrated section states, humanity's 'mistake—their Error of Errors—was simply forgetting the weather. Tabitha had warned them all about The Change, and that season was ultra-disastrous' (2019: 563).

As Kariba Dam collapses and Zambia's geography is dramatically reshaped by flooding, the anonymous 'boy' of the book's family tree is born, but he—as the nonhuman narrator emphasizes—'doesn't know who his father is' (2019: 563). This lack of knowledge suggests what is perhaps the ultimate error or deviation in the novel's multigenerational plot: numerous plot lines (as well as family relations) converge in this boy's figure, but his uncertain lineage mirrors and amplifies the inscrutability of humanity's ecological predicament. As the focus of the novel's multilinear structure, human kinship falters; instead, it is replaced by the swarm's uncanny ability to live in the interstices of human history, and perhaps outlive it. Ultimately, readers discover that this multigenerational plot is controlled, or at least influenced, by factors eluding any strictly anthropocentric understanding of generations—and the 'we' of the swarm, similarly to the bee motif in *Clade* but much more overtly, crystallizes the imperative of expanding our kinship to the nonhuman world.

Conclusion

Multilinearity, I have argued in this article and elsewhere (Caracciolo 2021, 2023b), is a particularly productive form as contemporary fiction confronts the imaginative challenges of the climate crisis. Climate change is distributed in both time and space, frequently across vast scales, and can only be understood as a global phenomenon. Multilinear narrative strategies are well suited to recreating the global reach of the crisis: they allow narrative to encompass characters across significant spatiotemporal distances, thus revealing the historical roots of climate change or its dramatically

⁹ Importantly, this 'reveal' is phrased ambiguously, as a series of questions: 'Are we red-blooded beasts or metallic machines? Or are we just a hive mind that runs a program that spews Wikipedian facts?' (Serpell 2019: 562).

different consequences in various parts of the globe. However, in discussions on the global novel (e.g., Barnard 2009), multilinearity is mostly thought of in *spatial* terms: it conveys a cosmopolitan viewpoint that—as influentially argued by Heise (2008)—is urgently needed to come to terms with the scale of climate change. Just as needed, though, is insight into the *temporal* depth of the crisis, how it derives from historically specific practices of extraction and exploitation and how it magnifies future uncertainty, particularly for younger generations. It is not surprising, then, that numerous contemporary climate change-focused novels are revisiting the inherently multilinear form of the family saga. This configuration allows narrative to directly perform what, in the context of ageing studies, Woodward (2020) has theorized as ‘generational time’, which denotes an ability to imagine the succession of generations and therefore the long-term impact of climate change mitigation strategies (or the lack thereof).

There are multiple examples of this kind of generational thinking in the climate change novel, as I have argued here. Where these works differ, however, is in the degree to which they question an anthropocentric understanding of generations and associated concepts such as family and kinship. Posthumanist theorists such as Haraway (2015) and Rose (2011) have attempted to extricate kinship from an anthropocentric view grounded in species-specific, sexual reproduction. Instead, kinship opens up to entanglement with the nonhuman, which is also perceived as kin—for example, through the imagination of evolutionary time. Not only do this article’s case studies embrace a multigenerational form to address the climate crisis and related ecological challenges, but they put a great deal of pressure on conventional models of kinship. Bradley’s novel adopts biological language (via the titular *Clade*) as well as the bee motif to defamiliarize the human collective of family. Yanagihara envelops kinship in uncertainty and aligns it with the bleakness of humanity’s outlook—with more positive affect only emerging sporadically and in relation to nonhuman creatures (such as Charlie’s ‘pinkies’). Finally, Serpell deploys a collective narrator (the mosquitoes) to unsettle the teleology of the novel’s family tree, suggesting that human goals and desires are always subject to the whims and errors of the nonhuman. In all of these ways, our imagination of generational time is not only deepened but also detached from anthropocentric assumptions—and this might be narrative form’s most successful response to the temporal scale of climate change.

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