A Challenging Age: Literature, the Climate Crisis, and Intergenerational Dialogue

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The concept of generation has a long and distinguished literary history. Homer famously compared human generations to leaves falling and growing back in a seasonal cycle:

> Why ask me of my lineage? Humans come and go as leaves year by year upon the trees. Those of autumn the wind sheds upon the ground, but when spring returns the forest buds forth with fresh vines. Even so is it with the generations of humankind, the new spring up as the old are passing away. (Homer 1898: 6; translation slightly modified)

Striking here is the sense of sudden temporal compression that derives from the comparison between leaves and human generations. Read today, the effect is reminiscent of time lapse, an acceleration that conveys an emotionally infused perspective on the passage of time. The simile also elegantly embeds human societies within the cycles of the natural world. Yet Homer's language presupposes natural cycles that are in themselves fixed, an entirely predictable background hum to the comings and goings of human generations. In times of ecological crisis, the forests budding forth with fresh vines also become unstable: burned or cleared to make space for agriculture, their rhythms altered by a changing climate. As the 'largest collective action problem that humanity has ever faced', to quote philosopher Dale Jamieson (2014: 61), climate change challenges the practices and rhythms of childhood, maturity, and ageing. It calls for a profound reconsideration of generational language and thinking. This special issue offers a range of perspectives on how literature, in engaging with climate change, productively renegotiates these ideas and the ethical and cultural tensions that traverse them.[1]

[1] Most of the contributions to this special issue are based on papers presented at the symposium of the Vlaamse Vereniging voor Algemene en Vergelijkende Literatuurwetenschap (VAL) in November 2022 (Ghent, Monasterium PoortAckere).

Another philosopher, Samuel Schleffer, notes that 'most of us who live in contemporary liberal societies lack a rich set of evaluative resources for thinking about the human beings who will come after us' (2018: 1). Climate change confronts us with the limitations of our conceptual and 'evaluative resources'—and, in fact, the climate crisis plays a major role in Schleffer's discussion of why we should worry about future generations (to paraphrase the title of his book).[2] In large part, that is due to the temporal scale of the crisis. Consider the dramatic changes to the Earth's climate and ecosystems that are experienced more and more frequently around the globe: rising temperatures and sea levels, habitat loss, extreme weather events such as exceptional droughts or wildfires. Causally speaking, these transformations are the result of processes that started with the industrial revolution at the end of the eighteenth century. The changes we witness today depend on greenhouse gases that were released decades or even centuries ago: they are a problematic legacy from the past (and more specifically the past of Western modernity). On the other hand, even if human societies stopped emitting carbon dioxide today (which is obviously impossible), the CO2 already present in the Earth's atmosphere would have effects for generations to come. Put otherwise, climate change has a built-in time delay, such that the link between cause and effect is never immediate but stretches out over vast temporalities: the decisions we make today, with full awareness of the scale of the problem and its consequences, will affect life on Earth for numerous generations after we are gone. Therefore, climate change calls for long-term thinking across generations, and not merely in the sense of older generations worrying about their immediate descendants but reaching much further into the future.

This is, of course, complicated by the fact that the effects of climate change are not only temporally but spatially distributed. Its global reach creates unique geopolitical challenges in that the societies that are most responsible for the crisis (in the wealthy Global North) are also the least vulnerable to its consequences (see Crist 2013). Thus, while it is easy to speak about human generations in a general way, different cultures approach their intergenerational relationships differently. We can definitely learn from cultures, such as the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, that incorporate previous and future generations in their decision-making processes (see Graham 2008). Drawing inspiration from these non-Western cultures might prompt us to better understand how the effects of climate change will linger in intergenerational trauma, or how intergenerational amnesia—the idea that each generation forgets or ignores the knowledge of previous generations—might erase memories of disappearing landscapes.

Particularly in the developed world, where the vast majority of greenhouse gas emissions are being generated, there are very good reasons to think older generations are not doing a

[2] See also the discussion in Krznaric (2020).

particularly good job of caring for younger ones. Because of that, climate change has often been framed in terms of intergenerational conflict, particularly in the context of youth activism. A highly mediatized speech delivered at the UN Climate Action Summit by Greta Thunberg (2019), for example, pointedly opposes 'us' (children) to 'you' (adults).[3] This type of rhetoric serves a specific political function in environmental activism (see Mangold and Winslow 2023): indifference and inaction vis-à-vis the devastating impact of climate change are presented as a failure of intergenerational dialogue and care.

The climate crisis represents a crisis of generation in a more restricted, biological sense as well, particularly as adults weigh the desirability of having children in times of radical uncertainty. In a *New York Magazine* article, for instance, David Wallace-Wells discusses his unease at the prospect of raising children: 'Among this outwardly conscientious cohort, there is worry about bringing new children into a damaged world, full of suffering, and about 'contributing' to the problem by crowding the climate stage with more players, each a little consumption machine' (2018). As the climate-changed state of the world looks increasingly difficult to predict, what kind of practical and psychological skills will future adults need to cope with its uncertainty? That kind of question is feeding the ecoanxiety experienced by many adolescents and younger adults.[4]

As noted by scholars such as Nicole Seymour (2013) and Adeline Johns-Putra (2019), parental care is frequently invoked in environmental rhetoric as a springboard for action: 'caring for the planet' and 'caring for our children', from that perspective, become almost interchangeable. That way of framing responsibilities towards future generations has some obvious limitations, however, starting with its implicit reproductive (and therefore heteronormative) bias. The equation between environmental and parental care is exclusionary, since it leaves out those individuals who cannot or do not want to have children but are still invested in environmental stewardship and in the flourishing of future generations. Furthermore, as mentioned above, the long-term thinking needed to grasp the issue of climate change extends well beyond concern for one's immediate descendants.

As childhood enters political and social debates on climate change, old age is also becoming a focus of intergenerational tensions and, in some instances, hopes. Thus, Kathleen Woodward has discussed the significance of ageing in times of climate crisis, arguing that old age deepens the 'need to embrace interdependencies across the life course, understanding that whole lives and generational reciprocity are at stake' (2020: 55). The relationship between age and the ecological crisis is complex. Older individuals, and particularly those in a position of power or privilege, are

[3] See García (2020) for a sustained rhetorical analysis of Thunberg's language in this and other speeches.
[4] For discussion of ecoanxiety, see Palinkas and Wong (2019).

frequently seen as turning a blind eye to the crisis, and therefore as responsible for it (insofar as indifference to the climate crisis has the inevitable consequence of deepening the crisis). On the other hand, the 'legacy thinking' associated with old age—that is, the desire to leave a lasting mark on the world—can inspire pro-environmental attitudes or action. Through this tendency, older adults may be better positioned than younger ones to accept the uncertainties of the climate crisis and promote intergenerational dialogue (Frumkin and others 2012).

Lastly, it is worth keeping in mind that understanding generational reciprocity in exclusively human terms is problematically reductive. The ecological crisis is also a crisis of more-than-human interconnection: despite the (largely Western) fantasies of mastery and technological self-sufficiency, human communities are part of a fabric—a 'mesh', in Timothy Morton's (2010) terminology—that includes plants, animals, and entire ecosystems. While it is sensible to frame climate change as a human problem in at least some contexts, the reality is that anthropogenic transformations are bound to affect most life forms on Earth. The problem of climate futurity is therefore one that prompts a reconsideration of kinship not only in the anthropocentric sense, but also in the extended sense of our responsibility towards the nonhuman species whose fate we (especially in the Global North) are determining.[5]

The essays included in this special issue engage with these cultural dynamics and tensions as they are staged by literature in times of ecological crisis. Our assumption is that literature can explore the material and cultural connections between generations and relate them to environmental issues and anxieties. Furthermore, as scholars in the field of ecocriticism have long acknowledged (see, e.g. Garrard 2004), literature represents an important means of imagining and interpreting human-nonhuman relations. Literary works negotiate the significance of childhood and ageing as human-nonhuman relations become unstable or change dramatically.[6]

We are using the word 'negotiation' in the technical sense formulated by Stephen Greenblatt (1988) and more recently developed by Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck (2017): literary texts can stage societal issues and deploy imaginative and formal tools to come to terms with rifts and contradictions within the cultural field. This negotiation does not necessarily lead to a harmonious resolution, however: literature can develop an 'imaginative counter-discourse' to dominant ideas or serve as 'cultural-critical metadiscourse', to borrow the terminology introduced by ecocritic Hubert Zapf (2001, 2017). Through metadiscourse or critical commentary on environmental attitudes, literature can make an important intervention in debates on the intergenerational dimension of the climate crisis.

[5] See Rose (2011) and Haraway (2015) for this broad understanding of kinship.
[6] Relevant here is also work on the representation of ageing in speculative and dystopian fiction, which often adopts a posthumanist perspective. See Falcus and Oró-Piqueras (2023) for discussion.

The articles collected in this issue explore these literary negotiations by triangulating fields that have engaged in limited conversation so far: ecocriticism, children's literature scholarship, and ageing studies. The emphasis is on how the concept of generation itself is performed by literature (for both children and adults) on a thematic as well as formal level. Thematically, the figure of the child takes on unique significance in environmental fiction, embodying the anxieties of parenthood but also the promise or 'might' (Beauvais 2015) of younger generations (see Caracciolo 2022). Children's literature itself has often addressed environmental themes, and there is a growing body of ecocritical scholarship devoted to it.[7] The first article in this issue, by Vanessa Joosen, builds on those discussions to ask how children's literature can avoid the negative emotions associated with climate change, working instead towards a more hopeful imagination of intergenerational futures.

Narrative can also speak to generational relations in times of climate change on a formal level, by adopting strategies that challenge a conventional, Western understanding of temporality.[8] While scholars in the field of econarratology (James and Morel 2020) have started investigating the ecological significance of narrative form, the articles in this issue focus their attention on narrative forms that bring together two profoundly different kinds of relations: intergenerational bonds and broader questions on humanity's responsibilities towards the nonhuman world. These forms play a central role in the articles collected here. Marco Caracciolo discusses multilinear sagas that chart the longue durée of environmental exploitation or disaster, often extending kinship (metaphorically or diegetically) beyond the human domain. Simona Adinolfi's reading of Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018) examines how the novel's looping forms can capture Western society's inability to overcome indifference to the crisis. Focusing on *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) by Métis author Cherie Dimaline, Dylan Couch engages with a temporal structure derived from Indigenous storytelling, the 'spiraling time' of Anishinaabe mythology, in which past and present generations coexist. Emma-Louise Silva's discussion of Malorie Blackman's *Pig-Heart Boy* (1997) examines formal strategies for the representation of intermental processes in fiction, showing how Blackman uses such strategies to address both intergenerational questions and the broader problem of human-nonhuman relations in times of ecological crisis. The dialogue between image and verbal narrative in the picturebooks examined by Jonas Vanhove also creates new formal opportunities for the representation of more-than-human temporalities. Indeed, going beyond the conventional format of the print book might be one of the ways in which contemporary literature can rise to the challenges of the Anthropocene, for instance by adopting multimodal devices or by opening itself up to digital media.

[7] See Echterling (2016) for an important intervention in this area, which also surveys ecocritical approaches to children's literature.

[8] These formal strategies are well positioned to capture the spatiotemporal complexity of the climate crisis. For further discussion, see Caracciolo (2021).

Finally, the context in which children's literature is read—typically involving a mixed-age audience—can itself be regarded as a laboratory for strengthening intergenerational bonds. This is one of the key assumptions that underlie the contributions by Joosen, Silva, and Vanhove. It is an idea that deserves to be pursued also with more empirical means, for instance by drawing inspiration from the field of 'empirical ecocriticism' (Schneider-Mayerson and others 2020). While there is no doubt more work to be done to expand the interdisciplinary conversation launched by this special issue, we hope our discussion will be seen as a useful and constructive starting point.

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