Complex Temporalities and Shared Reading: Picturebooks in the Anthropocene

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Abstract

Starting from the notion that the current environmental crisis challenges traditional notions of temporality, this article argues that children's picturebooks are uniquely positioned to help engender a 'critical temporal literacy' (Huebener 2020, 24). The combination of different modes (visual, tactile and textual) in picturebooks can offer innovative representations of alternative temporalities. Furthermore, as picturebooks are usually the first books encountered by new readers, the reading practice is often shared between generations which raises opportunities for intergenerational thinking and communication. I discuss three contemporary picturebooks (*Once Upon A Time There Was And Will Be So Much More* by Johanna Schaible; *Tales From The Inner Cities* by Shaun Tan; *Seasons* by Blexbolex) that employ different literary strategies to enrich human temporalities through contact with the nonhuman.

Keywords: Children's literature, picturebooks, Anthropocene, environmental crisis, econarratology

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Introduction

In *Nature's Broken Clocks: Reimagining Time in the Face of the Environmental Crisis,* Paul Huebener argues that "the environmental crisis is indeed a crisis of time but responding to this problem is not merely a matter of speeding up or slowing down; it requires untangling the complexities of time in its many cultural and ecological forms" (2020, 11). The connection between temporality and environmental crisis is not straightforward and is unique to the current moment. As Dipesh Chakrabarty writes: "for the first time ever, we consciously connect events that happen on vast, geological scales— such as changes to the whole climate system of the planet—with what we might do in the everyday lives of individuals, collectivities, institutions, and nations (such as burning fossil fuels)" (2018, 6). The connection between everyday lives and larger geological scales is captured in the notion of the Anthropocene, a proposed timeframe that is marked by the impact Western industrialized societies have had on the planet's geological layers. The most striking symbol and symptom of the Anthropocene is perhaps the climate crisis. For a long time, climate change, caused by the activities of Western industrialized societies and one of the biggest threats to the continuation of the human species, did not evoke a response worthy of the danger it poses. Even when science proved decisively that global warming was happening and that it was anthropogenic, the sense of urgency did not immediately reach the general public. Of course, politics and economics have played their part in this lack of action. In *Losing Earth* (2019) for instance, Nathaniel Rich discusses the role the oil industry played in the obstruction of actual action being taken. However, the difficulty in judging the severity of climate change is also linked to the existence of conflicting temporalities. Rob Nixon for instance, considers climate change as an example of the 'slow violence' of environmental destruction, which is "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2011, 2). This slow tempo is difficult to grasp for the human imagination, because it does not occur within the temporal plane of our everyday lives. Now that there is a

significant increase in forest fires, drought, and floods in Western societies and we thus experience some of the consequences of global warming, the sense of urgency is finally growing. In other words, the slow pace of climate change is accelerating and colliding with our felt experience of everyday. It is this collision of different timescales, living a life that takes place on different temporal planes at the same time, that highlights the need for what Huebener calls a "critical temporal literacy" (2020, 24).

As one of the first encounters for children with the outside world, picturebooks help children to build a model of that world (see for instance Stephens 2011, Nikolajeva 2014, Coats 2019) and thus inevitably play an important role in developing an understanding of abstract concepts such as time.[1] "To unpack these [time] socialization stories", writes Charis St Pierre, "involves considering the timescales at which these books operate, when and to whom they are oriented, and the ways human temporality falls in or out of sync with the various, multifaceted temporalities of other than-human beings" (2023, 3). Following St Pierre, this article asks how picturebooks might engender in young readers a critical temporal literacy on the one hand, and how, as a highly specific form of intergenerational communication, children's literature contributes to an intergenerational understanding of environmental crisis.

There are two ways in which picturebooks are well-suited to encompass multiple temporalities at once. Firstly, as an object, it can, as the selected examples will demonstrate, employ visual, textual, and material means to counter the well-established Western linear imagination of time. Secondly, the often shared reading practice of picturebooks, between adults and children, is also a confrontation between multiple temporalities. While the adult is looking into their past for a nostalgic vision of childhood, the child is looking forward into a future marked by adventure, more individuality and more agency in an expanding world. In order to explore how picturebooks can help raise awareness of the complexities of time in the Anthropocene, I draw on insights from the field of econarratology, which proposes that "narratives can convey environmental understanding via building blocks such as the organization of time and space, characterization, focalization, description, and narration" (James and Morel 2020, 1). I have selected three contemporary picturebooks that, each in their own way, adopt a highly sophisticated temporal structure. Johanna Schaible's *Once Upon a Time There Was And Will Be So Much More* (2020) foregrounds, through experimentation with page size and binding, that a single moment—"Make a wish!"—exists within many different temporalities. In Shaun Tan's *Tales from the Inner Cities* (2018), human and nonhuman temporalities collide, which has a profound effect on both. Lastly, Blexbolex's *Seasons* foregrounds

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[1] Following Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, who argues in *The Routledge Companion to Picturebooks* for "the particularities of the picturebook as a unique art form" (2018,4) and thus the need to establish the picturebook as a separate category, I will employ the spelling in one word throughout.

human entanglement with nonhuman phenomena through an associative rhizomatic reading strategy and displays how other temporalities guide our actions more than our traditional, human-invented clock time.

Picturebooks, Temporal Imagination, and Intergenerational Collaboration

As mentioned above, I see two ways in which children's picturebooks can hold different temporalities simultaneously: the material object and the narrative and visual strategies employed on the one hand and the implied shared reading practice on the other hand. As "the very notion of time takes its form through development of metaphorical thought" (Huebener 2020, 13), the aesthetic means of children's literature can be important in the conceptualization of an abstract notion such as time. Time itself is often represented through spatial metaphor. Even aspects of time that are not directly experienced, such as the movement of time, receive specifications through metaphorical language. As Boroditsky writes:

> Does time move horizontally or vertically? Does it move forward or back, left or right, up or down? Does it move past us or do we move through it? All these aspects are left unspecified in our experience with the world. They are, however, specified in our language most often through spatial metaphors. Whether we are looking forward to a brighter tomorrow, falling behind schedule, or proposing theories ahead of our time, we are relying on spatial metaphors to talk about time (2000, 4).

If the Anthropocene and climate crisis challenge us to reconsider our notion of time and "if figurative thinking forms the essence of our explanations of time, then the self-conscious manipulation of metaphor is of fundamental importance" (Huebener 2020, 13-14). In (adult) literature, formal experiments with temporality have already been described by scholars working in the field of econarratology. In *Narrating the Mesh: Form and Story in the Anthropocene*, Marco Caracciolo proposes four spatial models of narrative that manipulate the more traditional linear spatial metaphor into a different shape. First, a discontinuous progression, which "resists linearity *from within*, building on a linear (sequential) structure but also disrupting it via a highly fragmentary organization" (2021, 72). Second, a loop, which "undercuts teleology" and "also creates a paradoxical sense of closure" (2021, 73). Third, a network-line plot organization, in which different plot lines "first presented as independent from one another, converge and become increasingly intertwined" (2021, 73). The final spatial model is rhizomatic, which is a "nonhierarchical form[s]

of organization that make[s] connections horizontally rather than in a linear, tree-like fashion" (Bazzul & Kayumova 2016, 288). In narrative, a rhizomatic structure is highly decentralized and thus "fosters a plurality of connections and a sense of playful openness" (Caracciolo 2021, 73).

These alternative temporal structures also feature in contemporary picturebooks. In their discussion of temporality in *How Picturebooks Work,* Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott argue that the picturebook chronotope is "an excellent illustration of word and image filling each other's gaps, or, of even greater significance, compensating for each other's insufficiencies" (2006, 139). In other words, the multimediality of picturebooks seems to make them even better equipped to foreground different temporalities. However, Nikolajeva and Scott also argue that "complex temporality is often limited in picturebooks because of their compact nature, which excludes long time spans" (2006, 165). The picturebooks discussed here (and others that have recently been published, such as Oliver Jeffers' *Meanwhile Back on Earth* and *Begin Again*) demonstrate that picturebooks can include larger scales and conflicting temporalities. The fact that many have been published only recently might indicate that children's literature is trying to find new ways to handle discussions of time and convey complex temporalities. Hopefully, this renewed interest in temporal literacy will help future generations to think beyond the "structural short-termism" (Adam & Groves 2011, 18) of human action which has lead us into environmental crisis.

Apart from this reconsideration of the complexities of time, the "slow violence" of climate crisis also requires a strengthening of intergenerational bonds and a sensibility for intergenerational collaboration. As Stephen M. Gardiner argues, climate change is a "substantially deferred phenomenon" because it is "resilient" and 'backloaded' (2006, 403). In other words, with a phenomenon like climate change, the full impact of a generation's actions, good or bad, can only ever affect a future generation. This temporal dispersion thus requires intergenerational thinking and communication, which is what picturebooks and texts for young readers have been doing for a long time. In the introduction to *Intergenerational Solidarity in Children's Literature and Film*, Zoe Jaques and Justina Deszcz-Tryhubczak argue that "texts for young audiences stimulate intellectual and emotional appreciation of multifaceted connections between generations through representations of intergenerational solidarity and […] children's and adults' joint engagements with such texts may turn into collaborative cultural practices around reading that strengthen intergenerational bonds" (2021, XII).

In children's literature, both generations bring their own world knowledge to the text. Picturebooks require a lot of gap-filling and therefore "we may find infinite possibilities for word-image interaction" (Nikolajeva and Scott 2006, 2). Furthermore, the high need for the co-authoring of the text by the reader-viewer is connected to the typical reading practice of these picturebooks:

picturebooks are often read in collaboration with adults. This reading practice of asking questions and pointing things out with someone from a different generation, who brings a different world knowledge to the table, helps to build a shared model of the world.

Sandie Mouraõ's discussion of wordless picturebooks in "What's Real and What's Not: Playing with the Mind in Wordless Picturebooks" for instance, offers examples of children working together to make sense of Antione Guillopés *Loup Noir* (2004). Mouraõ separated a class group in smaller groups and asked them to write the story that might accompany the wordless illustrations. In their discussion, the children "used language skillfully to talk collaboratively about their interpretations" (2015, 198) and managed to come up with "very creative responses to the wordless picturebook" (2015, 198). After a reading of the book guided by their teacher, who pointed out a visual element the children had missed, the children created a different story which contained a different causal relationship between the pictures. In this case, the adult helped the children to integrate more elements into their interpretations, but only after the children got the chance to tell the story from their own perspectives as well.

In recent years, ambiguity has become an important aesthetic quality of picture books (see Campagnaro 2015). Ambiguity is understood in this context as illustrators using illustrations that "do not directly represent the text but rather fill in the textual gaps" (Campagnaro 2015, 122). The ambiguous text-image relation affords children and adults "a space for things to be undisclosed and unsaid and encourages children's interpretive involvement" and "allows children to experiment with the relativity of points of view" (Campagnaro 2015, 141). Mouraõ's case study mentioned above illustrates Campagnaro's assertion and serves as a great reminder that picturebooks offer much-needed opportunities for children to "share their understandings and interpretations of all literature, to use oral language to think together" (Pantaleo 2015, 239).

According to Sylvia Pantaleo, in recent years, "the illustrations in picture books have become increasingly more sophisticated over the years: changes in printing technology have also affected the range of artworks represented in these multimodal texts" (2015, 226). The increased aesthetic awareness and tolerance for ambiguity reflects "current efforts to rethink, revalue, and refashion what childhood is and how it is experienced" (Reynolds 2007, 91). Furthermore, innovations in printing techniques have also helped to develop more complex forms of visual storytelling. This "often involves an unusual format or element of graphic design that then plays a major role in the narrative […] many wordless picturebooks are highly innovative works that defy boundaries [and] question the conventional linear reading process" (Kümmerling-Meibauer 2014, 8). The combination of this high tolerance for unusual formats and ambiguity and the idea of a shared reading practice where different generational worlds collide, makes picturebooks ideal

contenders for grappling with the imaginative challenges of understanding climate change and the Anthropocene.

Spatio-Temporal Zoom in Johanna Schaible's *Once Upon a Time There Was and Will Be so Much More*

Johanna Schaible's *Once Upon a Time There Was and Will Be so Much More* is an example of a visual narrative that, in a highly original manner, depicts the multilayered temporality of the present moment. Read linearly, the book opens in the past when "billions of years ago, land took shape", brushes past the present—"Now! Make a wish!"—and eventually ends up in an open-ended future filled with questions—"What do you wish for the future?". The book visualizes the motion of temporally zooming in and out on a present moment by having the pages physically shrink in size when moving from past to present, each page becoming smaller so that previous pages remain exposed. The format of the page adapts accordingly from a standard picturebook double spread to a widespread panorama. Conversely, when the book proceeds into the future, the pages grow in size. Furthermore, when the reader is in the present, the smallest page in the book, all the different temporalities (era, years, months, hours, minutes) become visible. Where picturebooks usually freeze the narrative mid-action on one page and then continue after the turning of the page (see for instance Perry Nodelman 1988), here the page break is never absolute, emphasizing the flow of time rather than causality, duration rather than singular frozen moments on a single page.

The smallest page, the present, depicts a starry sky with a shooting star cutting across, hence the line "Make a wish". The outlook of the page resonates with the final page, which once again portrays a nighttime sky. However, this time the sky is lit by faraway city lights. Both pages also reflect the very first page, back when "land took shape", where the dark sky is lit by drops of magma, escaping the wild flood of volcanic material that is busy creating the earth's geological layers, the very same layers that will one day be altered by human activity. These three pages express the limits of and even point beyond the human experience of temporality: a deep past, the inescapable present, and a near and far away future. In between these pages, past moments are marked definitively by statements, whereas the future is marked by open-ended questions put to the reader.

The book also presents a different formal challenge, because although the book can be read linearly, it also invites a parallel reading. In a parallel reading, the reader compares the pages of similar timeframes in the past and the future. The result is a world overtaken by human presence and invention. For instance, a page in the past marked "hundreds of thousands of years ago, people

moved from place to place", referring to the first migrations that spread the human race across the globe, becomes a page of people walking leisurely, sporting the latest backpack in a similar but changed landscape, that has been adapted for human living. Another page shows people building the great pyramids. Its future opposite is then a page of people visiting them, transported there by the many multicolored coaches we all know so well from the touristic spots close to home. The book does not provide an overt commentary of issues of mass tourism. Instead, it might even feel like it promotes tourism by asking "what sights will stay with you always?". The adult reader however might wonder whether these images present a positive outlook or whether the questions hide a bleaker future vision. Another example: a page from the past depicts a landscape invaded by a quarry. The combination of text and image indicates that humans are already altering the landscape: "ten years ago, the landscape looked different". The corresponding future page shows an entirely urban space, filled with apartment blocks, only livened up by a few spots of green from the obligatory trees planted by the side of the road. Here, the caption asks: "where will you live in ten years' time?" Although the image is definitely a pleasant vision of urban living, the question takes on a different dimension when the reader realizes that all that open green space, a living space for all forms of nonhuman life has been usurped by humans in a timespan of only twenty years.

It is no stretch to imagine that readers from different generations will react differently as the relation to the past and the future changes when a person grows older. The book thus challenges its dual readership to engage in an intergenerational conversation about the human influence on the planet. Adults can discuss their past and the role their generation has played, whereas children are invited to voice their hopes for the future: the book ends with the question "What do you wish for the future?".

Schaible's work foregrounds the flow of time and in doing so exposes a series of environmental concerns. The reader, who is addressed directly and whose life unfolds against the background of great planetary changes, is placed in the middle of those environmental concerns. In her visualization of time passing, Schaible employs a discontinuous progression, where the reader jumps across time with each turning page. However, by making the previous event still visible from the next page, Schaible has found a way to concretize the way the past reverberates into the present. Conversely, the way the future is already visible from a previous page, due to the innovative play with the page sizes, also demonstrates how desire and longing influence the present. Each moment in time is framed by other similar moments.

However, there still remains an imbalance between the represented deep time of the past and the implied narrow future of a single lifetime, reflecting the difference between accepting that humans have not always been around and having to accept that humans might not be around in

the future. Even though the vision of the future is limited, *Once Upon a Time …* successfully combines deep planetary time with the experiential human time frame and offers a way of imagining these conflated temporalities while also inviting the reader to think intergenerationally.

Human and Nonhuman Temporalities in Shaun Tan's *Tales from the Inner Cities*

Shaun Tan's *Tales from the Inner Cities* is a collection of poetic short stories and illustrations, described by Lorraine Kerslake as a "visual poetic journey" (2022, 45). The stories place 'wild' animals (i.e. rhinos, bears, tigers, …) and more urban animals (i.e. pigeons, dogs, …) in an urban landscape and explore how the transformed landscape affects nonhuman modes of being and what the confrontation between human and nonhuman intelligences could mean for the way we inhabit the urban landscape and give meaning to our modern lives. One of the most striking differences lies in the temporal experience of the human and nonhuman. A city is of course a beacon of the entrepreneurial spirit of the Anthropos that does not sit well with nonhuman temporalities. As Tyson Yunkaporta notes, "a city is a community on the arrow of time, an upward-trending arrow demanding perpetual growth. Growth is the engine of the city—if the increase stops, the city falls […] A city tells itself it is a closed system that must decay in order for time to run straight, while simultaneously demanding eternal growth" (2020, 50). Humans have changed their landscape to fit with the capitalist desire for economic growth, a story following the model of linear progress. However, by introducing nonhuman animals to this urban world, *Tales from the Inner Cities* becomes a meeting place of conflicting temporalities. Instead of considering Tan's city purely as a landscape, it might be more effective to think of it in Barbara Adam's terminology as a "timescape", a landscape in which "ecological phenomena" are understood "as complex webs of interdependent temporalities" (Adam, quoted in Bensaude-Vincent 2022, 213). The term timescape "opens up a window on the temporalities of things we interact with" (Bensaude-Vincent 2022, 213) and foregrounds, as Shaun Tan does in these stories, that "time is immanent to beings, to all things whether animate or inanimate. There are as many times, as many lifelines as there are things" (Bensaude-Vincent 2022, 215). In several stories, contact between human and nonhuman causes the human to slow down the pace at which they are living. Furthermore, the slowing down brings the human in contact with some form of previously inaccessible ancient knowledge.

In the story *Crocodiles*, crocodiles live on the 87th floor of an otherwise normal apartment building, where they have "big long walls of uninterrupted glass along which to follow the sun all day, slowly moving from east to west; such luxurious reptilian basking would never be possible at ground level" (2018, 11). The office-workers in floors above and below them do not know they

are there but they do know this: "fall asleep at your desk and you'll be running naked through a dark forest screaming terrified monkey gibberish, only to wake with a rush of overwhelming exhilaration and clarity, of feeling absolutely alive" (2018, 12). The proximity to the nonhuman, although it occurs unknowingly, enlivens an otherwise grey and dull corporate existence. The crocodiles are presented as possessing some kind of knowledge that is inaccessible from the human perspective, thanks to their significant temporal perspective:

> Nobody even remembers that this whole city was built on a swamp. The crocodiles, well, they've been living in this very spot for a million years and I'll bet they'll still be here long after the traffic has ground itself back into mud […] In the cool brain of a crocodile, the city is just a waiting room: the biggest of all waiting rooms, rising up through an age with which they have no account, no appointment, and to which they owe no attention (2018, 13).

The accompanying illustration offers a view of the uninterrupted glass of the apartment building, which reflects the cloudy sky. In the left upper corner, a lone window-cleaner seems suspended in time. Because his body is reflected in the never-ending glass, the reader-viewer might suspect an uncoupling of mind and body. While the body rests outside in the human urban space, the mind is trapped in the reptilian world that the presence of the crocodiles seems to conjure.

In the story of the butterflies, a hoard of butterflies comes out "at lunchtime" (2018, 17), a trivial time indication yet very indicative of a modern human temporality. The butterflies are numerous: "not millions, billions or even trillions, but a number beyond counting, beyond even the *concept* of counting, so that people on the street were relieved of any estimation" (2018, 17). The choice of the verb *to be relieved of* seems to imply that there is a pressure on modern humans to permanently occupy a rational state of mind and forego their intuitive bodily being. Similar to the contact with the crocodiles, which released an ancient, mystical, beastlike reflex in the otherwise so composed office workers, the contact with the butterflies releases the humans from "the endless ticker-tape of voice-over narrative" (2018, 18) that is the human linguistic mind: "but for now, the briefest of all moments, we did not ask why. We thought of nothing but the butterflies, the butterflies settling on our heads" (2018, 19). Here the butterflies are not given their own form of intelligence: it is their sheer beauty, "descending from dizzying heights like spring blossoms of every imaginable colour and pattern" (2018, 17), which is offered to the human characters on a scale so big that it is impossible to ignore. This chance encounter with non-human beauty triggers in the human a pre-linguistic level of being in the world, if only for the briefest of moments. The

illustration forms the counterpoint to the image of the crocodile story. In the same blue-grey urban setting filled with high-rise buildings, the people have come outside to bask in the multicoloured eruption of butterflies. Where the window-cleaner was a lone figure, suddenly disconnected from his presence in the human-made world, here the humans get together in equally high numbers as the butterflies.

In the story of the *Yak,* an unnamed narrator works in a very modern factory that creates mechanical vegetables. In this highly modernized and fast-paced world, there exists just one connection to a more mystical and ancient way of being, the yak, "a shaggy old animal that management somehow forgot to sell, upgrade or retrench" (2018, 211). Everything about this animal is so slow and quiet that it becomes nearly indistinguishable from its surroundings: "At first you can't see it against the grey, but then you focus like a monk, and it's like a soft spot that lightens, peels away from the vanishing point of the factory wall. […] we just huddle and listen to the bells reach our ears first, bells that are so quiet they go *under* the sound of industrial compressors where nothing could possible rise above it" (2018, 211). When the narrator and his co-workers climb on top of the beast, they "become so buried in those layered curtains of hair that I feel lost in the heartbeat of this giant furnace of an animal" (2018, 212). On top of the yak, the pace of the modern world finally slows down: "The cars, buses and trains rush past in rush-hour frenzy, but none are as pleased with their speed as those who ride the yak" (2018, 212). Not only does time slow down, it is even capable of reversal on the yak: "like children, maybe that's what we are becoming, losing interest in phones and newspapers, shrinking in size until our clothes become blankets, we can crawl inside our own pockets, just wanting to savour the oceanic sway of bovine hips and shoulders, this old lullaby, and feel the world shift around our ears" (2018, 212). When they arrive, not a couple of hours but "many ages later" (2018, 212), they have been changed, they "drift, just like that, like paper boats, all the way across cracked footpaths and rubbish-strewn lanes and leaky stairwells, all the way to each and every bright-painted doorframe, drawn in by glowing yellow blooms of kitchen steam, children laughing and crying and clattering toys, the long lines of white crumpled linen, the chime of bells and the deep, deep, woolly smell of home" (2018, 213). Finally, as the "woolly smell of home" contrasts with the smell of the yak that is "deep and earthy and beautiful, strangely familiar" (2018, 212), Tan's poetic evocation of how contact with the nonhuman can bring down the pace at which we live eventually reveals what is most important to the laborers: a sense of belonging, which they find at home, in the presence of the next generation. *Yak* thus also fosters a different temporal connection, between adulthood and childhood, emphasizing the contrast between a dulling rational mind and a different, more intuitive mode of being. This connection receives a visual counterpoint in the illustration of the yak carrying the

workers home. The image, which strongly recalls Monet's *Impression, soleil levant*, is impressionistic in style, with very little delineation of the figures and buildings. The impressionist endeavour of capturing fleeting moments of light and beauty is mimicked here in the fur, where flickering strands of bright colours show where people have made their ascent on to the yak's back and into the realm of childhood, which promises them the relaxation that comes with living in the now.

Finally, the story *Dog,* which has also been published as standalone, treats the encounter between human and nonhuman in a different manner. Where other stories focus on how contact with the nonhuman offers access to a different temporal experience, *Dog* emphasizes the longstanding bond between humans and dogs by temporally zooming out, like in the work of Johanna Schaible, and showing the deep shared history behind a simple dog walking moment in the city. The experimental form of *Dog* is hybrid: stanzas from a poem alternate with successive double page illustrations. The poem starts with "once we were strangers / rough voices falling to the wind / every tooth and claw and stick a weapon / every urge a ragged mystery" (2018, 23). The following page is a double spread of a man, recognizable as a hunter by its spear and a wolf-like dog. Strangers to one another, man and dog are staring at each other from different river banks. That river, the reader finds out in the next stanza, is time itself: "Time flowed out before us / an endless river" (2018, 27). The following spread displays man and dog hunting together as they have entered a communal space in the endless river of time.

Tan approaches the human-dog relationship from an evolutionary perspective, indicating how individuals may die, but both species continue to live and strengthen their bond: "And when you died / I took you down to the river / And when you died / You waited for me by the shore / So it was that time passed between us" (2018, 31). The following pages each display a person and a dog, occupying the same land. However, as opposed to the first picture, they are looking away from each other, both on their shore on the river Time, waiting for the other to reappear. The double page spreads show man and dog in diverse iterations: Indigenous American and wolf-like dog, African hunter and greyhound, European soldier and a German shepherd, ending with a modern city dweller, walking a black Labrador, that most popular of domestic dogs. By holding on to the same composition in every illustration that alters only slightly with each repetition—imagine a human and dog separated by a diagonal structure that is alternatively a forest, a desert, an icy land, cultivated farm land, an aqueduct, a wartime railroad structure, and finally a dull, grey city road— Tan emphasizes that this mysterious interspecies bond is the result of a slow-moving transition.

In every transition, the landscape takes on an ever more human, urban form, slowly distancing both the human and the non-human animal from the natural world. The poem underscores this point made by the visual storytelling. The reader is made aware of how the non-

human animal started in a shared world with the human and ends up in a world shaped by and for humans. In the beginning, the lines read: "Time flowed out before us, an endless river, the plains opened up, the sky lifted, and you cried out to me then '*This world is ours!'* and so it was" (2018, 27). After the illustrated evolution outlined above, the lines read: "But now everything is different / The river flows wrongly / the plains are gone / the sky presses down like a thousand ceilings" (2018, 53). Although this hybrid form of poetry and visual storytelling displays the far-reaching irreversible effects of human activity on the planet, it is also a love story of a strong inter-species bond that occurs both on a personal scale, the moment when the modern city dweller walks their dog, but also on a deeper historical scale, in every iteration of the human-dog bond there has ever been.

Put together, the different *Tales from the Inner City* offer a view of a humanity that lives in fast-paced, altered world, while being locked in an abstract mind. Through bodily contact with the non-human world, a sort of regression occurs. This regression to an earlier state of being, similar to that of a child or a non-human animal, brings the body in accord with the world that surrounds it. In doing so, Tan seems to signal that fast-paced contemporary life can only be slowed down by reintegrating more contact with the non-human. Through the deep time lens of *Dog, Tales from the Inner Cities* offers a successful example of what such a relationship might look like.

Seasons: Associative Shared Reading

Blexbolex's *Seasons* (originally published in French under the title *Saisons*) offers its readers a bright-coloured, nearly encyclopedic overview of all the objects we use and encounter at different times of the year, the activities we pursue and the emotions and affects that constitute our inner lives as it is influenced by the changing of the seasons. Through the juxtaposition of an illustration on the left-hand page and on the right-hand page, both accompanied by a word, which is descriptive of either the object illustrated or an affect evoked by the picture or felt by the person depicted, the reader-viewer is asked to associate and find connections between the illustrations. The illustrations evoke associations through diverse strategies such as their shapes, colour schemes, or the accompanying word. But *Seasons* also counts on the world experience of its audience, as the combinations range from straightforward, such as the combination "cocoon-butterfly", to highly mysterious, such as the combination "decorations", which shows a child decorating a Christmas tree, with "thoughts", which shows an adult sitting in a snowy landscape, hugging herself and blowing out a breath of air. Of all the three case studies presented here, *Seasons* requires the highest level of very personal gap-filling.

Furthermore, this associative strategy, which not only requires the reader-viewer to look closely at the illustrations but also to examine their own associations and inner life, foregrounds the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman earth processes. The people in *Seasons* are not lone agents with an all-encompassing agency. Instead, their activities, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the states of their inner lives, are constantly influenced by nonhuman processes, of which the weather is the most notable. This associative endeavour seems to be an ideal method for taking stock of an incomprehensible Anthropocene present. This makes this reading strategy, looking for clues to string images together in meaningful sequences, highly rewarding and reflects in some way the rhizomatic experience of living in the Anthropocene: how can we make sense of our human lives as part of different assemblages of human and nonhuman earth processes?

The temporality of *Seasons* also forces its readers to think about the connections between human and nonhuman. *Seasons* offers an example of what is sometimes called "natural timekeeping", which privileges "environmental processes as the markers and units of time's passing rather than abstract numerical categories such as hours and weeks" (St Pierre 2023, 41). The difference with our more habitual 'clock time', is that natural timekeeping is not an abstraction, but firmly rooted in our concrete experience of the world, in "the material cycles of the earth" (St Pierre 2023, 17). *Seasons* foregrounds the many different material cycles that constantly cross human-nonhuman boundaries: growth, harvest, nesting, birth, hunting, and so on. As Charis St Pierre notes, "as much as children's literature trends toward the revolving cycles of sunsets or seasons, to speak of 'cyclical time' could be to speak of any one of these timescales, or a million more" (2023, 42). The way the boundaries between human and nonhuman are crossed in these material cycles can be intended by the depicted humans, as in "harvest" for instance, but also unintended: the plastic garbage left by people in one illustration, becomes the foundation for a bird's nest in a future illustration. However, as *Seasons* does not offer the same deep time effects of the other case studies I discuss here, it does not entirely succeed in helping its reader-viewers to imagine the difference in timescale between the long-lasting decay of the plastic and the, in contrast, short life of the chicks born in that nest.

Even without depicting deep time, *Seasons* does evoke how objects, events, or affects can travel the multiscalar ladder. For instance, a double page spread depicts on the left-hand side a traffic jam, the cars carrying happy families on the way to a holiday destination. The right-hand side of the spread depicts a colony of ants or antlike creatures. The shape of the traffic jam and colony are alike, which invites the reader to think about the connection that is being drawn. Is there an enormous evolutionary difference between us and the ants or are we all just repeating similar cycles, governed by some force outside of our control?

In addition to confronting the reader with the human role in material cycles and natural timekeeping, the child-adult relationships depicted in *Seasons* also show how a personal temporality, whether a person possesses a larger past or a larger future, influences their experience of a certain event. For instance, one combination shows an adult woman dressed in summer clothes. Her head is held high, as though she is basking in the sunlight. The page reads "freedom". The opposite page shows a child, also dressed in summer clothes, lying on a bench, playing with a toy car. The page reads "loneliness". The book does not display how the passage of time feels differently at certain ages, but portrays accurately how a similar event, which is in this particular case the momentary absence of other people, causes different affects depending on the phase of life you find yourself in. As such, *Seasons* rewards a collaborative reading between children and adults, where they can meet in the interpretation of the book and see how their temporal nature influences how they experience the world. The emphasis on natural timekeeping, in combination with the rhizomatic associative reading strategy that foregrounds entanglement and interconnectedness, and the opportunities for reflection on the different generational reader-viewer's own place in the cycle of life, offers a mirror to see ourselves as part of Anthropocene assemblages, that exist on multiple and diverse temporal cycles.

Conclusion

As cultural products, picturebooks aid in conceptualizing time and creating a "critical temporal literacy" (Huebener 2020, 24). With the consequences of enduring and collective human action on the planet becoming clear, the Anthropocene calls for a novel conceptualization of time that integrates different scales, ranging from experiential to historic and planetary. Furthermore, models for intergenerational communication and thinking become increasingly relevant. Picturebooks can both offer novel imaginations of time, through their textual, visual, and material strategies, and open up avenues for different generations to come together, through their implied shared reading practices. I have discussed how the traditional spatial metaphor for time in Western societies, the linear model, can be challenged by other spatial models. I have discussed how three contemporary picture books employ different strategies to foreground these alternative temporalities. Johanna Schaible's *Once Upon Upon a Time There Was And Will Be So Much More* visualizes how different timescales converge in a single moment and all single moments resonate far beyond the present. Shaun Tan sees fault in the fast-paced urban lifestyle of the presence and looks for a remedy in slowing down the pace through contact with the nonhuman. That contact with the nonhuman is epitomized in the human-dog relationships, which Tan takes out of the everyday by foregrounding

the rich historical transformations dogs went through to become man's best friend. Blexbolex's *Seasons* foregrounds the entanglement of human and nonhuman earth processes through a rhizomatic structure that demands an associative reading strategy. Furthermore, the three picturebooks reward a shared reading practice between adults and children, which opens up new meanings. In these multiple ways, children's literature affords a diversity of heterogenous temporalities and in doing so is finding imaginative ways to speak to our Anthropocene present.

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