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Lilliam Rivera's Eco-Dystopia, *Dealing in Dreams*: Nourishing YA's Climate Literacy through Narratives of Disobedience and Hope

La eco-distopía de Lilliam Rivera, Dealing in Dreams: Alimentando la alfabetización climática de los jóvenes a través de narrativas de desobediencia y esperanza

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ABSTRACT

The article addresses some trends in recent Young Adult literature, including the "unspoken convention" that literature for young people needs to be reassuring. Although there is no question that climate change is a global emergency and that young people are among the most effective climate activists, scholars of children's and YA literature have been slow to recognize the importance of this topic and, to this date, children's literature organizations have no position statements on climate change. Several writers of YA lit., on the other hand, are openly addressing the issue, showing climate change to be a systemic and complex crisis that has no simple, single solution. They maintain, however, hope by choosing open and precarious endings that, through acts of disobedience, reaffirm care and interdependence. Lilliam Rivera's eco-dystopia, *Dealing in Dreams* (2019), shows the educational journey that the protagonist undertakes, one that is paralleled by the readers.

KEYWORDS

Lilliam Rivera; Dealing in Dreams; eco-dystopia; climate change; Young Adult literature.

RESUMEN

El artículo aborda algunas tendencias de la literatura juvenil reciente, como la «convención tácita» de que la literatura para jóvenes debe ser tranquilizadora. Aunque no cabe duda de que el cambio climático es una emergencia mundial y de que los jóvenes se cuentan entre los activistas climáticos más eficaces, los estudiosos de la literatura infantil y juvenil han tardado en reconocer la importancia de este tema y, hasta la fecha, las organizaciones de literatura infantil no se han pronunciado al respecto. Sin embargo, varios escritores de literatura infantil y juvenil abordan abiertamente la cuestión y muestran que el cambio climático es una crisis sistémica y compleja que no tiene una solución simple y única. No obstante, mantienen la esperanza eligiendo finales abiertos y precarios que, mediante actos de desobediencia, reafirman el cuidado y la interdependencia. La novela *Dealing in Dreams* (2019), de Lilliam Rivera, es una ecodistopía que muestra el viaje educativo que emprende la protagonista, uno que es paralelo al de los lectores.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Lilliam Rivera; Dealing in Dreams; ecodistopía; cambio climático; literatura juvenil.

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1. Introduction

Two recent studies on Young Adult (YA) literature show the changes that have occurred in the last two decades. Starting with the premise that YA novels constitute an increasing market, resulting in a "growth spurt in YA literature," Melanie D. Koss and William H. Teale (2009, 563) collected a corpus of 370 titles published in English between 1999 and 2005, out of a pool of "high quality (award winners) and popular" books, in order to get a "clearer picture of recent trends in YA book publishing" (2009, 564). Their findings, not surprisingly, suggested that the majority of popular and/or award-winning books are predominantly realistic in content (realistic fiction 47%; fantasy 12%; science fiction 3%) and are concerned with typically adolescent themes such as "fitting in, finding oneself, and dealing with major life changes." By analyzing 175 books featured in the "Young Adult Hardcover" bestseller list of the *New York Times* for the years 2020-2022, a more recent study by Anna Wehmeier Giol (2023) confirmed the growth spurt in YA literature but showed different findings about the genres.[1] Although as Rebekah Fitzsimmons and Casey Alane Wilson have noted "young adult literature is not a single genre but a publishing category that encompasses *multiple* genres" (2020, xi), Wehmeier Giol used Michael Cart's 6 YA-genre classification, adding a seventh: speculative fiction (comprising both science fiction and fantasy), historical fiction, romance, horror, mystery/suspense, humor (original 6) and contemporary realism which, for Wehmeier Giol, includes social themes and issues. Most fiction books are speculative fiction, with fantasy clearly dominating over science fiction (2023, 9-10). Wehmeier

1 As Deborah L. Williams notes, "books are big business: according to the Association of American Publishers, children's and YA fiction accounted for 3.72 billion dollars in 2018 publishing revenue; speculative fiction accounted for the largest share of those sales" (2023, 12).

Giol further divides then the speculative fiction group into 5 more categories (following the BISAC / Book Industry Standards and Communications codes): wizards & witches, dystopia, paranormal romance, vampires, and werewolves as she wants to see if YA is still influenced by the sagas that have shaped YA literature as we know it today (these being *Harry Potter*, *The Hunger Games*, and *Twilight*). According to Wehmeier Giol's analysis, then, dystopias and paranormal romances are still popular, but current YA books are shifting toward the representation of LGBTQ+ characters and themes and of social issues, such as friendship, racism, and depression: "This reflects the flexibility of YA to follow trends and adapt to the needs of its readers, which are currently directing their attention to social movements and diverse voices" (2023, 18).

Given this last statement, it is surprising that none of the words associated with ecocriticism find any mention in these studies, and a look at the BISAC codes, the list of subject descriptors used by the Book Industry Study Group (a membership organization made up of a diverse slate of publishers, manufacturers, wholesalers & distributors, libraries, retailers, and industry partners), has no place for "climate change," "sustainability," or "climate justice." The closest it gets to the topic, is with the descriptor "Science & Nature/ Environment" and "Science & Nature/ Disasters" in the Juvenile Fiction section (https://www.bisg.org/juvenile-fiction). Similarly, despite climate change representing a worldwide emergency and youth climate activists being the most outspoken, Marek Oziewicz and Lara Saguisag (2021) noted that the field of children and YA criticism has been slow to react to the topic, a fact that has brought them to consider the field's inattention to climate change to be a systemic issue. A literature review that Marek Oziewicz and Nick Kleese completed in late 2020 shows that out of the total of 5,726 articles published to that date in nine children's literature journals, only 41 mention climate change at all and only 14 directly engage with the topic (Oziewicz and Saguisag 2021, x). With position statements on practically any subject of interest to children and YA, there are no position statements on climate change by any children's literature organizations, special committees, or interest groups.

And yet, there is no doubt that climate change – the preeminent issue of our time – can no longer be considered a concern for the future; it is a current catastrophe that is profoundly altering populations and landscapes. However, this is not a catastrophe for which everyone is equally responsible, nor one for which everyone is equally affected. Communities in the Global South bear the brunt of climate change's harsh effects, even as countries in the Global North produce most of the world's emissions. In addition to being disproportionately affected by climatic disasters, disabled people, Indigenous peoples, and Black and people of color, working-class, impoverished communities, and women also suffer from incompetent, ableist, racist, classist, and sexist institutional responses to these disasters.

The fight for racial, economic, and social justice is inextricably linked to the effort to preserve our world as a habitable place. In order to address the climate crisis, one must acknowledge that it is the result of a protracted period of capitalist, colonialist expansionism. This system equates progress with the exploitation of people, flora, and fauna; the creation and maintenance of hierarchies between and within species; and the conquest and erasure of cultures and ecosystems. Oziewicz and Saguisag, in fact, remind us that while climate change is frequently discussed in terms of potential ecological and social collapse, environmental apocalypse has become the lived reality of Indigenous peoples worldwide in both the past and the present due to the destruction of natural environments which forces people to relocate both physically and psychologically. Furthermore, they continue, the Covid-19 pandemic has shown us how climate change is likely to exacerbate forms of eco-apartheid that are already well-established: wealthy families will use their political and economic clout to adapt to the crisis, moving to more hospitable areas and utilizing technologies that will enable them to carry on with their work, purchases, and entertainment. The less fortunate and marginalized populations, however, will have to deal with widespread unemployment, homelessness, starvation, and inadequate health care (2021, vi).

The challenge of climate change can then be both intimidating and traumatic. Despite the presence of superstorms, hurricanes, fires, heat waves, droughts, and flooding that make us think

of climate change as a spectacularly violent, exceptional, and single event, Rob Nixon (2011) has described a large portion of climate change as "slow violence" against the earth and its various life forms. As such, there is no single, simple solution to the pressing subject of how to put an end to this violence. However, young climate activists with their rage, hope, and sense of community, are forcing adult-led institutions to take action. They are assuming leadership positions in the decarbonization and climate justice movements. They insist that fairness and accountability be the guiding principles of climate change adaptation and mitigation plans. Already, they are rethinking institutions, economies, and daily routines (Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022). Their goal is to establish an ecological civilization that values all living things, including natural resources.

But not all young people are involved. A recent newspaper article states that when faced with an apparently hopeless disaster, 8 out of 10 young people assert that they suffer from eco-anxiety, 79% are pessimistic about the future of the planet, and 60% do not want children because of climate change (D'Aleo 2024, 19). Although eco-anxiety does not exclusively lead to paralysis, it may be simpler for some to give in to grief, fear, or even denial or to withdraw into inaction. Dystopian literature for young adults is increasingly offering novels that envision a world ravaged by global warming, coupled with post-apocalyptic visions of disastrous events related to climate change and environmental destruction (Kerslake 2022, 442). Given these bleak scenarios we are left to wonder what allure such narratives may have for young readers: on the one hand, the risk of paralysis, on the other, the risk that these texts can be perceived as "flights of fancy" rather than realistic projections of a potential future is obviously there (Basu et al. 2013, 4). How, then, can literature written with young adults in mind be used to nourish climate literacy? What does it mean for a YA dystopian novel to be about climate change? What strategies can be more successful in mobilizing their readers? And how can climate change novels reconcile their narratives of impending or already happened doom with what Perry Nodelman has called youth's lit "unspoken convention" that literature must be reassuring (1987, 19)?

2. Climate Fiction, Dystopia, and Young Adults

Climate fiction shares with dystopia some of their constitutive features.[2] Both are supposed to trigger important reactions in their readers and require an active participation by offering insight into contemporary issues and engage readers in debate. By their very nature, eco-dystopias deal with dark times and, much in line with what I and others have called "critical dystopias" (Sargent 1994; Baccolini 2000; Baccolini & Moylan 2003), tend to offer open or not altogether unhappy endings. Through the combination of images of a bleak future with hope still possible, they interrogate the present, thus maintaining the potential to inspire the "social dreaming" that is central to utopia (Sargent 1994, 3). But most of all, they can also call to action their readers. Rebecca L. Young, in *Confronting Climate Crises Through Education* (2018), presents a strong argument for the transformative power of literature as a catalyst for action and rationale for change. Because of the emotional reaction elicited, bringing up environmental issues in the classroom can serve as a platform for engaging young adults.[3]

Such features make these novels a good source of inspiration for teenagers who are on the brink of adulthood and are struggling with the instability of their present(s) and the social systems

2 I will not deal with the debate on the term: climate fiction/cli-fi, climate change fiction, Anthropocene fiction, climate change dystopia, eco-dystopias. I will use "eco-dystopia" and refer readers to Conrad Scott's discussion of the terms (2019-20, 404-410).

3 From the standpoint of political studies, Calvert W. Jones and Celia Paris (2018) similarly suggest that more research into how fiction influences political attitudes is needed. Focusing on dystopian fiction, they present findings showing that such narratives consistently increase support for radical, political actions. However, contrary to common assumptions, dystopian fiction does not appear to reduce political trust or efficacy.

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that aim to mold them into adults. What M. Keith Booker has said about dystopia in general, becomes particularly appropriate for YA eco-dystopias: "If the main value of literature in general is its ability to make us see the world in new ways, to make us capable of entertaining new and different perspectives on reality, then dystopian fiction is not a marginal genre" (1994, 176). And it is a genre that can make a difference: these novels may provide young readers with challenging stories that not only help them make sense of their world but offer them means of resistance. Speaking of the fantastic – by which he does not mean the genre nor its commodification by the culture industry – Jack Zipes claims that through fantasy (or imagination) we seek to make sense of the world (2009, 78). But most of all, we "do not need [fantasy] to compensate for dull lives, but […] for spiritual regeneration and to contemplate alternatives to our harsh realities. […] We need the fantastic for resistance" (Zipes 2009, 79; cf. Baccolini 2019, 117-18).

Undoubtedly, many contemporary YA novels imagine gruesome scenarios in a future climate-changed world. Recent years have seen a surge of YA dystopian novels, whether they treat directly the issue of climate change or use it as a backdrop for their protagonists' struggles. Early examples include a wonderful novel like M.T. Anderson's *Feed* (2002); Julie Bertagna's *Exodus* trilogy (2002-2011; *Exodus*, *Zenith*, *Aurora*); Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* series (2005-2007, *Uglies*, *Pretties*, *Specials*, *Extras*); Susan Beth Pfeffer's *Last Survivors* series (2006-2010; *Life as We Knew It*, *The Dead and Gone*, *This World We Live In*); Saci Lloyd's *Carbon Diaries 2015* (2008) and its sequel *Carbon Diaries 2017* (2009); Paolo Bacigalupi's *Ship Breaker* (2010); Cameron Stratcher's *The Water Wars* (2011); S.D. Crockett's *After the Snow* (2012); Sarah Crossan's *Breathe* (2012) and its sequel *Resist* (2014); up to more recent novels like Lilliam Rivera's *Dealing in Dreams* (2019); Lydia Millet's *A Children's Bible* (2020); Cory Doctorow's *The Lost Cause* (2023); as well as Finnish author Emmi Itäranta's *Memory of Water* (2012) and Italian author Giuliana Facchini's *Borders* (2022) and *No Borders* (2023).

The presence of so many visions of futures with a capacity to frighten and warn raises the question not only of why such literature is so attractive to young readers, but also of its "aesthetic qualities and political valences," as Balaka Basu, Katherine R. Broad, and Carrie Hintz have remarked (2013, 2). These three critics break down their analysis to "three major areas of contention": how "these texts balance didacticism with pleasure," whether they "espouse radical political change," and whether "they offer their readers hope or despair" (2013, 2). The second and third of these concerns, together with the ability to develop critical thinking, seem to me the most relevant today.

The possibility that these texts, because of their exciting adventures and gripping plots, may be read as fantasies rather than anticipations of a possible future, is obviously a risk, but they may also provide young adults with an encouragement "to think about social and political issues in new ways, or even for the first time" (Basu et al. 2013, 4-5). Whether the YA eco-dystopia can be seen "as inspiring change or whether it has fallen short of its potential" is a question that cannot be answered easily. However, drawing on Alexa Weik von Mossner's study (2017), existing research in cognitive literary studies, neuroscience, and the psychology of fiction suggests that "engaging with virtual storyworlds can influence how we see the world around us" (Weik von Mossner 2017, 556). Empirical studies have shown that "reading fiction can increase people's empathy scores […] and reduce prejudice towards social outgroups" (2017, 559). There is reason to believe, then, suggests Weik von Mossner, that experiencing vivid simulations of a future world devastated by environmental catastrophe could influence how we perceive current developments that might lead to such a future: "In fact, it is quite possible that emotionally salient virtual experiences of speculative storyworlds are crucial for a fuller understanding of what is at stake" (2017, 559-60). Along similar lines, a recent study by Daysh et al. (2024) shows how imagining future scenarios – either utopian or dystopian – affects collective climate action through emotions like hope and fear. Their findings show that utopian thinking boosts climate action intentions by fostering hope, while dystopian thinking can also promote action, though through fear. Therefore, "both utopian or dystopian futures may be influential in evoking those emotions of hope and fear, motivating

collective climate action, and promoting transformational change for a better world" (Dayish et al. 2024, 23).

It becomes then essential to turn to one of these recent eco-dystopias and see how it takes up the task of providing an important avenue for exploring climate change crises. Rivera's novel, *Dealing in Dreams*, acclaimed for its portrayal of Latinx identities and culture, as well as its thoughtful exploration of feminist and queer themes, offers a compelling case study due to its resonance with contemporary social and political concerns. I will then show how Rivera addresses climate change indirectly through the setting and societal conditions and emphasizes the importance of community and collaboration, suggesting that an ethics of care is necessary to create sustainable change.

3. Lilliam Rivera's *Dealing in Dreams*: Hope and Resistance in Eco-Dystopia

Lilliam Rivera's *Dealing in Dreams* imagines a future in which the consequences of climate change have transformed society, bringing about authoritarianism and increased inequality. Although not the main point of the plot, climate change has a significant impact on the ecosystem and social dynamics, serving as a warning about the possible long-term effects of environmental neglect. But most of all, the novel shows the educational journey that the protagonist undertakes, one that is paralleled by the reader. The story follows Nalah, the leader of the all-Latina "Las Mal Criadas" gang, one of the many all-female gangs that patrol the streets of the matriarchal Mega City, ruled by the charismatic Déesse. Nalah aspires to move up in society by becoming a member of Déesse's elite inner circle. To accomplish this, she is sent on a risky expedition to infiltrate and destroy the Ashé Ryders, a rebel group that lives outside the city's walls.

The double setting of the novel – the matriarchal society of Mega City and the apparent "void" of Cemi Territory – reflects, on the one hand, the consequences of climate change and, on the other, serves to dismantle the lies of the regime's propaganda. The rigidly hierarchical society, we are explained from the very beginning in what will be revealed to be the master narrative of the leader, is the result of a combination of human exploitation with a catastrophic event, for which men (as males) are deemed responsible: "Before the Big Shake of 2060, men destroyed the city with their greed. […] The Big Shake happened and everything was gone" (Rivera 2019, 4). The new society is a world where women are trained "to defend themselves" and create a place "for women" while "the men […] are relegated to manual labor." They work in factories, carrying trash to the dumps and only if they are smart (to the level of being scientists or engineers) they're invited to be a part of Déesse's inner circle (2019, 4, 13). Other men find work in the city's clubs, as entertainers (male strippers and servants) whose various services can be bought by the women visiting (2019, 27). Men are objectified and are stripped of their names – they're referred to as "papi chulos" (2019, 32) – leaving in place, only in reverse, the gender binary.

What appears at first as a matriarchal, eco-friendly society will turn out to be, as a matter of fact, an eco-dystopia, whose inequal system rests on exclusionary practices and informs also the society's approach to climate issues. Mega City has simply reversed the gender binary without questioning the androcentric beliefs central to a patriarchal society. Far from being a feminist utopia, Mega City is entrenched in hierarchical binaries: it claims to support female empowerment but does not deconstruct the two-gender dichotomy. It still advocates for the superiority of one gender over the other and, as I will show, for the supremacy of (some) humans over nature.

But the gender divide is not the only one, other hierarchies are in fact maintained in Mega City, one being between the haves and the have-nots, one that is reflected in the architecture of the city. Luxury and comfort are only afforded to the elite, the few fortunate ones that live in the Towers; the rest of the population lives in underground homes or stations. The Towers symbolize the

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ultimate reward in Mega City that only Déesse can grant, and it constitutes a powerful motivator for the protagonist: as residents in the Towers are kicked out "when they fall out of favor" with Déesse, new apartments become available (2019, 45). Despite the arbitrary nature of the reward system, Nalah is only interested in becoming part of the fortunate ones.

What emerges is a society divided along gender and class discrimination, heavily based on competition, absolute obedience, and violence. But the real dichotomy is primarily between rich and poor, and both men and women are commodities in Déesse's world. Young girls from poor families are sent to training camps, where kids are taught "what they will need to know to survive. The anatomy of a body. The best places to throw a punch" (2019, 216). It is a system that demands sacrifices and moral compromises: only by fighting one's way to the top may one try to escape from the violence, scarcity, and oppression of the city. The matriarchal society, then, offers very little even to the female part of the population.

It is a system, however, that the narrating voice of the novel accepts, at first, without reservations. Far from questioning Mega City's brutal and competitive framework, she embraces it as long as she believes she can get out of it, and in order to do so she loyally follows its violent rules. Her description of the class division of the citizens of Mega City between the "chosen ones" and the "toilers" reflects the young protagonist's conformist and selfish view, but in the description of the city structure it also reveals that nature is only afforded to the residents of the Towers. It is the only "green space" left in the city:

> The three tall buildings that make up Mega City Towers have the shape of a giant letter U. It's the only complex to survive the Big Shake with minimal damage. Those who live in the Towers get a gorgeous view of the courtyard that lies below at the center of the U shape. Only Tower residents have access to the blooming flowers and shady trees inside the courtyard. There's even a playground for kids. On most days, the rest of Mega City can peep enviously through the gates and admire the luxury of having such a green space. Not today. Today is the last Saturday of the month. The gates are wide open for the throwdown. The courtyard is overrun by Mega City people. As we enter, red paper flowers rain down from above, covering the floor in scarlet, the color of my crew. I look toward the hundreds of windows that make up the Towers and to those tossing the flowers. The *chosen ones*. They smile and laugh, secure in being far away from the *toilers* down below. Can't say I blame them. No one wants to be near regular ol' toilers, sweaty and reeking from hard labor. (2019, 52-53, emphasis added)

Most of Mega City, we learn, consists of concrete and steel constructions and bunkers where no plants can grow except for the Tower's courtyard. But in Nalah's words there is no hint of criticism for Mega City's system, nor is there regret for the loss of nature or the injustice perpetrated; no compassion really for the dirty "toilers," but only the desire to become part of the "chosen ones."

With most toilers who can barely read or write (2019, 10), Déesse's propaganda has constructed a clever narrative that hypocritically blames globalization while it continues to engage in extractive capitalism by exploiting human and natural resources. It is the motivational narrative recited at the beginning of every throwdown, the violent fights between the all-female gangs that periodically take place for the joy of the masses:

> My beautiful children! If you hear me, let me know. If you feel me, scream it to the sky […] All who hear me, far and wide, know that we are in this world for one thing, to make this life right. When everything around us was being destroyed by those lost in their blind ambition, we didn't cry. We didn't ask, 'why?' No, children, we got up and got to work. […] Today I want to talk about our hands. These hands. Back then we relied on others to make our things. Food. Clothes. Weapons. Globalization, they called it. A fancy word. A big word. It meant not looking within our own talent and relying more and more outside. How do we feel about that? […] Everything made in Mega City is done by us, for us. We reuse every single scrap. Repurpose every item. With these hands, no one can stop us.

> […] They, the money people, the liars, the men, they destroyed the homes we had. With our hands we now have a new place. Don't ever forget we did this together and we are going to continue to build a better future. Together. (2019, 56-57)

Déesse's rhetoric is built around the notion of hard work, merit, unity in adversity, pride, and the practice of reuse – as well as a nationalistic policy of isolationism. It matters little that the hands of the workers are not those of the fortunate few that live in the Towers – and even less so those of Déesse and her family – but those of the masses who are kept in check with synthetic food and drugs to "ease people's daily pain" (2019, 10). Her narrative takes pride in the environmentally-sound principle of reuse, a staple of sustainable living and waste management, but hers are only words. As Hannah Doermann has noted, Mega City's anti-globalization rhetoric, with its emphasis on self-sufficiency, echoes xenophobic anti-globalization narratives that promote economic nationalism, thus justifying its "isolationism and the militarization of its borders" (2021, 140-41).

When assigning Nalah the risky expedition to infiltrate and destroy the Ashé Ryders, Déesse explains to our protagonist how the society came about, crafting an apparently environmentally-conscious narrative that indicts men and extractive capitalism:

> After the Big Shake, Mega City was in shambles. It didn't take long for people to see the source of destruction began with men. The Big Shake happened because of their drillings and their need to take from this earth. In order to rebuild, we came together to form a new existence. It wasn't hard to convince everyone. And for a time, we were united. (Rivera 2019, 82)

Again, the narrative portrays Mega City as an ecological state, an eco-friendly place that openly opposes the extractive practices that are considered responsible for the collapse of the environment. But the fact that Mega City maintains such a cruel division between the nature it claims to protect and the human life it so blatantly disregards reveals the hypocrisy of a (pseudo)-environmentalism that fails to see humans and nature as part of the same ecosystem.

In order for Nalah and the readers to discover the contradictions of Mega City, Rivera juxtaposes another matriarchal community, one that is truly utopian, feminist, and eco-friendly not only by self-proclamations but also through actions. The journey that Nalah undertakes to gain information on the community outside of Mega City becomes her, and the readers', educational journey suggesting that another world is possible. Nalah becomes then a reluctant, resisting visitor to a utopia in the making. However, before Nalah and the readers can learn, they have to let go of the lies of Déesse's propaganda. The master narrative presents life outside the borders of Mega City, in what is called the Cemi Territory, as "a desolate wasteland" (2019, 187), full of "degenerates" who live with "no sense of community" but only "violence and uncertainty" and whose "wild cries and moans" are heard by who ventures close to the borders (2019, 20, 18, 83). Only "true horrors" and "unbridled violence" "await those who choose Cemi Territory over Mega" (2019, 83). And although Nalah and her gang do encounter violence and desolation before reaching the utopian community, cracks begin to appear in the master narrative. The first sign of Mega City's contradictory environmental practices is represented by "the vast amount of garbage" outside the city, a consequence of Déesse's anti-globalization stance (2019, 128). As residents are encouraged to discard all the furniture and appliances made in other countries, people began throwing the excess garbage over the border:

> Déesse declared there be an "Only Mega" Month. Residents were encouraged to throw away items with any reference to the old ways. "Made in China" or "Made in India." If these places exist, we don't know or care. Déesse told the residents that we should be proud of the accomplishments we made with our own hands. Everyone got rid of objects – furniture, appliances. Items proved to be too essential were to be refurbished. The original source of where the item was from had to be erased. When the dumps in Mega City overflowed, people started to toss the items over the border. Hence, the garbage. (2019, 128-29)

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But the major difference is represented by the features of the rebel community she encounters, a community whose leader and spokesperson turns out to be Nalah's estranged older sister, Zentrica. Equality and sharing are the foundational principles of Los Bohios, the utopian community in the making.[4] As she gets farther away from Mega City, the landscape changes and Nalah is surprised to find "actual life": "no more piles of garbage," instead, "wildflowers" and "large mountains," "living birds," and an actual village made up of "hundreds of circular dwellings made of wood" (2019, 188, 197). Once again, the architecture reflects the political structure of the community. Unlike the concrete and steel buildings of Mega City, these "appear flimsy, not durable" and they are all the same: "there's no difference between the bohios," no "sense of hierarchy" (2019, 199). With this choice of dwellings, Rivera evokes several important themes: she alludes to a possible Indigenous environmental culture, she describes a non-hierarchical community based on equality and solidarity, and she introduces the notion of imperfection and temporariness that are central to utopia. The children "play outside," learn to paint, write, and read – once again, marking the difference with Mega City, where if children are "not in the training camps, they're working" (2019, 198, 240-41). Men walk free, unbranded, showing no signs that they are the property of the women.

The free lifestyle of the community is connected to their ecological practices: food is not processed as they grow everything in organic gardens, meat is not part of their diets, and they trade with the people that live in the surrounding areas (2019, 207, 249). The discovery of the community's way of life forces Nalah to reluctantly compare the two systems. While the "soil is crap and doesn't take" in the concrete homes, her sister shares with her one of the basic tenets of their society: "if you can grow your own food, you don't need to depend on anyone" (2019, 207). Far from the proud, xenophobic anti-globalization rhetoric of Mega City, Los Bohios's philosophy is based on cooperation, solidarity, and care – for the other, without hierarchy between species. Their sustainability is at no one's expenses: "We made this place because everyone needs to get along. If one of us fails to carry their load it affects everyone else. We are on equal standing. No one is the leader here, not even me" (2019, 209).

Los Bohios then represents a utopia in the making: not so much attained, fixed, but articulated as a process – the process of building together a place "that values culture and individuality. A just world for everyone" (2019, 243). Significantly, as one character says, the people who are part of the community have chosen to be there, even at high personal costs (2019, 243). Rivera's utopian community, then, does not come free (or it would be some kind of Land of Cockaigne) and is in the here and now. It rests on hard work and must be shared and negotiated daily among members. Like many intentional communities, it is joined on a voluntary basis and is characterized by sharing, active participation, desire, choice, care, and intent (cf. Sargent 1994).

Nalah's education comes at the hand of two characters: her sister Zentrica and Miguel/Graciela, a non-binary person that Nalah takes back to the Los Bohios community. Both expose her to the reality of Mega City, even though it will take the betrayal of Déesse to finally open her

4 "Bohíos" is a Spanish term that refers to small huts or dwellings, typically made from natural materials such as wood, palm leaves, and thatch. The word has its origins in the indigenous Taíno language of the Caribbean and is commonly used in various Latin American countries to describe traditional rural homes. These structures are often associated with indigenous and rural lifestyles, reflecting a simple and functional design adapted to the local environment. For an analysis of how Rivera's novel portrays decolonial epistemologies and Latinx, Afro-Caribbean, and Indigenous perspectives as central to environmental justice, see Doermann (2021: 147-151). For an analysis of recent dystopias that, similarly to Rivera's, incorporate Native/Indigenous concepts of community, power, and responsibility, see James (2016).

eyes. Two poignant moments with Miguel/Graciela reveal Mega City's hierarchical and oppressive system by connecting violence, exclusion, and proprietary relations. With Nalah, the reader learns that Mega City not only discriminates against men and poor people but has also expelled non-binary individuals:

> If you want to live in Mega City, you are forced to abide by rigid rules on what it means to be a man and a woman […] There is no room for fluidity. Do you think violence makes you more of a woman? Does forcing papis to work at boydegas make them a better ally? Déesse's vision for Mega doesn't allow for differences. It doesn't allow for true self. (2019, 146).

In Mega City, then, there is no room for differences, for love, for beauty or empathy (2019, 135, 148).

With Nalah's beliefs finally wavering, Rivera makes room for resistance. Back in Mega City, she notices signs of rebellion within the city in the "tags on the wall" that make up a network of protesters among the toilers. But most of all, she is ready to reconsider her life and the ruthless model of survival endorsed by Mega City. While earlier in the story, she has no other option but to believe in Déesse, as she is torn between being aware that she does not "have the luxury of being able to reshape who [she] want[s] to be" and being proud that she "was born into this world to fight, to elicit pain" (2019, 222), now she can finally see the ruthlessness of Mega City's exploitative system:

> This city is a lie and I have fed off of it, knowing if I benefited, then to hell with everyone else. I didn't care what happened to others. The toilers, the papis, the kids entering the training camps. They didn't exist except when they were in my way. (2019, 298)

Nalah's shift from firm believer to alienated "punk" (as she calls herself), is the "break" or the "Gestalt shift" that must lead to "becoming utopian" (Moylan 2020, 7). Similarly, YA readers will follow Nalah's trajectory from apparent fulfilment to an experience of alienation and resistance.

I want to end by reading Rivera's call for disobedience and rebellion by comparing it with what I consider a classic of utopian sf, Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (1973). It is a thought-provoking short story that explores the moral and ethical dilemmas of a flawed/false utopian society whose happiness depends on the suffering of a single child, prompting some citizens to ultimately choose to leave the city in silent protest. The open ending raises more questions than it offers answers. Omelas is nothing but our present, our privileged world and represents the lifestyle of first world countries, a lifestyle that is made possible by the exploitation of resources and labor from the Global South. The image of the child suggests at first glance not only the sweatshops where women and children work for a few cents a day, but it also lends itself to an ecological reading, more relevant today than ever before, and a postcolonial reading, thus also encompassing the exploitation of nature, and the exploitation of the other, whether human being or animal and natural world. As readers we feel part of Omelas and as readers we find ourselves in the position of choosing, whether to stay in Omelas or leave.

But what does it mean to leave? The act of walking away has been variously interpreted. The act of leaving Omelas can be seen as an escape, an attempt at self-absolution, or a way to escape the world's problems. Some may exercise their privilege by disassociating from the system but never fully disassociating from the Western world. I believe, however, that the uncertain ending is what allows Le Guin to keep hope alive, a precarious and fragile hope, which, as Ernst Bloch reminds us, is "the opposite of security" (1988, 16). Leaving Omelas entails departing from secure comfort to embrace uncertainty and challenge the present. It involves rejecting complicity in the exploitation of others and striving to build a new world, offering inspiration to both residents of Omelas and readers alike through small yet significant acts of resistance (cf. Baccolini, forthcoming).

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Writing about the luxury of climate despair, Rebecca Solnit (2023) claims that "power resides in the few, at the top"; resistance therefore "must consist in refusing to believe them [… But] also instructive is the way large, successful actions usually began small" (online). Similarly, *Dealing in Dreams* shows the need to resist the lies of those at the top and ends with the realization that "change doesn't come overnight" but is "a slow build" (Rivera 2019, 325). Nalah does not have the answers but is ready to accept the precariousness of the future. Nalah's resistance starts with rejecting Mega City's exploitative system, choosing uncertainty, embracing solidarity, as well as developing a newfound appreciation for the natural world:

> We watch the sky transform from dark inky blue to a slight rose color. The hues we see are so intense. Before, I would never stop to watch day break. Instead I would hole up in a boydega or in a tunnel, eager to sleep off the night's activities. This incredible sight, the transforming sky, will be my guide. It's slow, this heavenly movement. We huddle in closer and wait for the day to finally break. (2019, 325)

Nalah's new resolve means she is now able to see, criticize, and reject the established order within her own society. Such recognition is the first step to participate in making the future. Nalah's stance then resonates with Rebecca Solnit's recent words:

> If we can recognise that we don't know what will happen, that the future does not yet exist but is being made in the present, then we can be moved to participate in making that future. We can be skilful enough to make directed efforts, and sophisticated enough to know that results remain unpredictable. Many acts have had a huge positive impact but not immediately or directly, and so learning to value slow and indirect consequences is crucial to recognising the nature of change. (2023, online)

Like Nalah, readers are also invited to believe that, in the words of the climate fiction writer Sarah Holding, young people "too can write our future" (2015, online). Rivera's and other eco-dystopias can represent "powerful tool[s that shape] readers' perceptions, making them receptive to – and invested in – the possibility of positive social change" (Williams 2023, 13).

4. Conclusions

By employing an open and uncertain ending, the bleak future imagined in Rivera's novel does not renounce hope but invites her YA readers to resist and to negotiate between relief and awareness. The protagonist of Rivera's novel educates herself and is educated into a displacement of and critique of the society she lives in. In dystopian settings that discourage diversity, depicting characters who resist and assert their agency through disobedience sends a crucial message to YA, who often seek conformity in their need to belong. Because adolescence is a period of self-definition and identity formation, YA eco-dystopias can be a powerful tool to promote critical thinking and create hope for change. Utopia is not accomplished yet at the end of the novel, but a utopian horizon is maintained for the readers and is fostered through hope, the education of desire, and the trope of the educational journey, as Le Guin's well-known quote has reminded every utopian student: "It is good to have an end to journey towards; but it is the journey that matters, in the end" (1989, 188). The encounter with the imperfect utopia in the making of Los Bohios serves to "create a space in which the reader is both brought to experience an alternative and called to judgment on it" (Levitas 2007, 56). Through a process that Tom Moylan has called one "of pleasure and pedagogy" (1008, 80), the function of utopia moves from being merely that of "goal and catalyst of change[,] to one of criticism" (Levitas 2010, 226). Thus, utopia's function is not only that of promoting change, but it becomes one of developing criticism.

With Nalah, readers are asked to rethink their relationship with the other – be it human or nonhuman life. The novel does not propose a simplistic reconciliation between humans and nature;

rather, it suggests the recognition of interdependence and solidarity, the interconnection between human and natural exploitation; hierarchy and binary-divisions; class and gender discriminations, and how societal conditions, environmental destruction, and resource scarcity are all inextricably linked. By confronting themes of power, inequality, and their link to climate change, Rivera keeps hope alive and maintains some room for action for her protagonist and her readers, provided they recognize that there cannot be protection of nature without protection of human life and vice versa, as humans and nature are part of the same ecosystem. By showing Nalah's painful educational journey, *Dealing in Dreams* does not foreclose hope; it interpellates YA readers to intervene critically in the imagination and construction of a future they desire and to possibly do something in their present that can begin to build that future.

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Raffaella Baccolini: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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