

Collective Narration and the Politicization of Climate Distress

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Introduction

A few pages into Lydia Millet's 2020 novel *A Children's Bible*, the narrator Evie, a teenage girl spending the summer in a spacious rented house with her parents, her younger brother, and several other families, finds herself confronting, in deeply personal terms, the end of the world as she knows it—"[t]he familiar world, anyway" (27). Such experiences of ecological precarity and inter-generational political failure, experienced by young people confronting the climate crisis, have become a driving force behind the global youth climate movement, fueled by a profound sense of indignation and urgent anger. A particularly striking example comes from Greta Thunberg's speech at the 2019 UN Climate Action Summit, which reveals the "moral outrage" (Antadze) of an entire generation:

This is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you! You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!

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Her final exclamation—"How dare you?"—functions as a direct political accusation, transforming personal fear and grief into a collective ethical claim and holding those in power accountable for the futures they have jeopardized. Moral outrage, as Nino Antadze notes, is a justified emotional response to climate injustice that has the potential to foster "collective political action" (24). Unlike self-focused anger, it is directed toward identifiable targets: political agents, policies, or systemic structures responsible for inequality and harm. In this sense, the indignation expressed by young activists illustrates how climate anxiety can take on a collective, politically charged dimension. Against this affective and political backdrop, this article examines how contemporary climate fiction¹ mobilizes narrative form to transform climate distress from a private psychological condition into a socially and politically legible experience tied to questions of justice, inequality, and collective responsibility.

Focusing on Millet's *A Children's Bible* and Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* (2021), I argue that this shift is mediated through a set of formal strategies that foreground the relationship between individual affect and collective consciousness. Both novels function as climate *Bildungsroman* (Mahajan), tracing the moral and emotional development of young protagonists confronting intertwined ecological, social, and political crises. They also mobilize a set of narrative strategies that, drawing on econarratological insights—the critical intersection of narratology and the environmental humanities (James)—mediate the shift from individual experiences of climate distress to a collective understanding attentive to systemic injustice.² Child focalization (Caracciolo) reorients climate affect away from nostalgic attachment to a stable past and toward forms of engagement attentive to present conditions and future survival, while collective narration—particularly the inconstant we-narrator theorized by Erin James—negotiates the boundaries between individual and collective subjectivity, rendering climate distress socially and politically intelligible. While *A Children's Bible* foregrounds the emergence of a shared generational climate affect among privileged adolescents in the Global North, *How Beautiful We Were* mobilizes collective narration to expose the uneven distribution of environmental harm within a postcolonial context and to articulate forms of collective resistance. To further clarify how climate distress becomes available for political interpretation in these novels, the following section situates this argument within recent debates on the post-political dimensions of climate change (Swyngedouw) and on the collective

and relational nature of climate affect. Drawing on the work of Louise Knops and Blanche Verlie, it examines how emotions such as grief, anxiety, and indignation can function not merely as individualized psychological responses but also as forms of collective political consciousness.

Climate Affect and the Post-Political

Erik Swyngedouw's notion of the post-political frames environmental crises as technocratic and ostensibly apolitical. The deeper political stakes—such as the unequal distribution of resources and responsibilities—are obscured, while individuals are tasked with managing their own contributions to the crisis. Systemic inequalities remain largely unchallenged, and apocalyptic narratives or fear-driven imaginaries further displace social conflict. In this way, climate change is often treated as a problem solvable through personal adjustment and technological fixes, rather than as a site for collective engagement with injustice.

Yet, as Knops argues, emotions and affective experiences can serve as a counterforce to these depoliticizing tendencies. By attending to the temporal dimensions of climate activism, she claims that the grief, anticipatory nostalgia, and moral indignation expressed by young participants in movements such as Fridays for Future can “politicize time in a fundamental way” (208). Drawing on Swyngedouw's more recent work, Knops suggests that the visible outbursts of political discontent and intense outrage in contemporary climate movements—what Swyngedouw describes as “boiling rancor” (*Promises of the Political* xvi)—signal emerging forms of politicization. These affective expressions, directed at futures “imagined as lost, stolen, or sold” (Knops 208), show how emotions can transform environmental concern into collective political action.³ From mourning for a future Earth that may never exist to attachments to the planet as a living collective and a determined resolve to defend the spaces we inhabit (often expressed through slogans such as “There is no planet B”), these affects open a critical political horizon in which the consequences of past decisions and ongoing systemic failures can be examined, while refusing to “lament Eden or demand to return to a past imagined as golden, stable, or pristine” (209).

Recent scholarship in affect theories has begun to examine more explicitly how climate distress is shaped by questions of justice. In her recent “Feeling Climate Injustice,” Verlie outlines the political and structural dimensions of climate distress, explicitly

seeking to “bring theories of climate justice to bear on the issue of climate distress” (1614). Verlie argues that climate distress⁴ has largely been treated within the psychological sciences as forms of individual mental vulnerability, rather than within the social sciences as political experiences of systemic injustice. As a result, approaches that frame climate distress primarily as an individual psychological condition risk “depoliticising, individualising and pathologizing people’s emotional experiences of climate change” (1602), thereby obscuring their structural causes. Verlie further contends that the subject of climate distress is not the individual human psyche but the “relational webs of climatic beings” (1605) within which humans, ecosystems, and more-than-human lives are entangled. Given that the impacts of climate change are themselves “unevenly and unfairly distributed” (1602), climate distress must likewise be understood as differentially experienced across communities and regions. This perspective calls for approaches that account for its uneven geographies and its entanglement with political and economic structures.

While discussions of climate anxiety—one of the most widely discussed manifestations of climate distress—often acknowledge its political character only implicitly, most commonly by framing it as an issue of intergenerational injustice affecting young people, this dimension is “rarely made explicit”⁵ and “fails to account for the intersectional differences and inequalities regarding who experiences climate distress” (1603). Crucially, the “climate” in climate anxiety is frequently understood in ways that exclude social concerns disproportionately affecting Black, Indigenous, people of color, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) people. This raises a key question: what, precisely, do different groups feel is at stake when they experience climate anxiety? For privileged subjects in the Global North, Verlie suggests that it may reflect grief for the anticipated loss of modern, privileged ways of life—ways of life historically sustained by invisible labor and exploitation (Head). In this sense, climate anxiety risks centering white, settler, middle-class experiences, while overlooking how it intersects with the more immediate and structural threats marginalized and disadvantaged communities face.

In response to these limitations, Verlie proposes moving beyond a narrow focus on anxiety and grief to theorize “feeling climate injustice” as a distinct affective formation. Climate distress encompasses not only worry or mourning but also rage, anger, indignation, abandonment, and cynicism—emotions generated by what she conceptualizes as “affective climate violence” (1604), produced

through fossil-fueled governance and the structural violence of colonial capitalism. Central to this analysis is Verlie's concept of "greenhouse gaslighting" (1603), which describes how fossil-fueled governments and corporations manage emotional responses to climate change by denying responsibility and recasting distress as irrational or excessive. To "feel" climate injustice involves resisting such gaslighting and acknowledging the emotional harms produced by affective climate violence, while fostering forms of collective engagement through which these emotions can be expressed and transformed into possibilities for political action. The following sections examine how contemporary climate fiction renders this process narratively and affectively legible through specific formal configurations.

Narrative Form and Collective Climate Distress

This article identifies a productive site of investigation in contemporary climate fiction that foregrounds intergenerational tensions and conflicts, where young protagonists navigate both environmental crises and the social and political legacies inherited from older generations.⁶ The two novels examined here situate intergenerational climate distress within the framework of the climate *Bildungsroman* while mobilizing formal strategies, such as child focalization and collective narration, to mediate the shift from individualized experiences of climate distress to collective and politically situated forms of climate feeling.

Published within a year of each other—Millet's *A Children's Bible* in 2020 and Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* in 2021—the two texts engage with comparable themes, even as they unfold in markedly different contexts: Millet's novel is set in the United States, whereas Mbue's takes place in a fictional West African village, reflecting the author's Cameroonian-American perspective. *A Children's Bible* centers intergenerational tensions against the backdrop of an escalating environmental crisis. The novel is narrated by Evie, a young girl spending the summer in a rented house with her family and several other households. Over the course of the story, the children gradually assert their independence from adult authority—first by attending a nearby beach camp on their own, and later after a catastrophic flood that destroys the house and transforms the surrounding landscape. By the novel's conclusion, Evie and her peers have adopted sustainable practices and established a new, autonomous way of life attuned to the altered world around them. *How Beautiful We Were* explores intergenerational conflict as

communities confront the long-term social and environmental consequences of colonial and corporate exploitation.⁷ The novel centers on the young inhabitants of Kosawa, a fictional West African village, who collectively face the ecological devastation caused by the US oil company Pexton. Its operations contaminate the water, air, and soil, destroy fertile farmland, and threaten the community's survival, while exacerbating existing power imbalances and leaving the population marginalized and impoverished. As the story unfolds, Kosawa's youth, guided by Thula, assert political agency and challenge the exploitative structures that have long governed their lives.

I situate both novels within the emerging subgenre of the climate *Bildungsroman*, which adapts the conventions of the traditional coming-of-age story to the context of ecological crisis. As Nandita Mahajan observes, the climate *Bildungsroman* charts the moral, emotional, and often political development of young protagonists confronting planetary-scale loss. The traditional *Bildungsroman* centers on the journey of the *Bildungsheld*—the protagonist—who undergoes a profound transformation following a period of suffering or loss. In the age of climate change, Mahajan notes, societies worldwide must learn to navigate a devastated world and grapple with large-scale loss, making the genre's key elements of “loss, suffering, self-awareness, introspection, and growth” (Lampert 172) particularly relevant for understanding how individuals and societies adapt to ecological crisis. Several authors of climate fiction, in turn, invoke this framework to portray young characters who move “beyond the shock and mourning that follows large-scale death or planetary devastation,” transforming “these affective states into meaningful” responses (Mahajan 53) and ultimately learning to adapt to a changed world. Crucially, because climate grief often triggers the *Bildungsheld's* maturation, the genre enables an intimate exploration of the psychological and emotional impact of environmental crises while situating these experiences within broader social and political contexts.

At the same time, the two novels examined here complicate the traditionally individualistic trajectory of the *Bildungsroman* through their emphasis on collective subjectivity and intergenerational entanglement. Unlike the classical *Bildungsroman*, which typically culminates in the protagonist's gradual integration into an existing social order, the climate *Bildungsroman* stages maturation within a world perceived as ecologically unstable and politically compromised. Coming-of-age no longer entails reconciliation with inherited structures but confrontation with environmental

precarity, systemic failure, and the collapse of adult authority. As James notes in relation to *A Children's Bible*, the prominence of the collective “we” allows the novel to be read as a form of “collective Bildungsroman,” representing the maturation not simply of an individual protagonist but of an entire generation learning to inhabit a transformed world differently from its parents (161). In both novels, maturation thus unfolds through collective forms of adaptation, political awareness, and resistance to inherited ecological and social crises.

In each text, climate grief catalyzes the moral and emotional development of the younger generation—particularly the two female figures who offer an individual point of access to the events narrated (Evie in *A Children's Bible* and Thula in *How Beautiful We Were*); in Thula's case, this grief is closely entangled with “postcolonial grief” (Kim), forging explicit links among loss, historical dispossession, and political struggle. Yet neither climate nor postcolonial grief remains confined to pain or paralysis. As Paul Bogard notes in his discussion of solastalgia—a concept introduced by Glenn Albrecht to describe the distress caused by the transformation and degradation of familiar environments, and one particular articulation of climate grief—“for all the pain caused by what has been lost and what might be lost, there is, within solastalgia, the promise of possibility” (Bogard 17), since it invites us to “grieve, and then also to act” (18). Grief, fear, and anger, Bogard argues, function as signals that “something is wrong” (19), registering structural harm and opening spaces for ethical and political engagement. A similar dynamic informs Jinah Kim's account of postcolonial grief: while grief “does not itself imagine or desire freedom” (9), it nonetheless renders it impossible to mourn without also imagining freedom from loss, even if such freedom remains incomplete and contested. The trajectories of the coming-of-age journeys diverge between the two novels: in *A Children's Bible*, Evie and her peers are led toward adaptation to a changing world, whereas in *How Beautiful We Were*, Thula's maturation transforms grief into deliberate political action, highlighting the novels' differing engagements with collective struggle.⁸

Catalyzed by climate and, in Mbue's case, postcolonial grief, both novels make strategic use of children's perspectives to explore the emotional and political dimensions of ecological crisis. In doing so, they decenter adult-centric understandings of climate change—often shaped by parental anxieties—while exposing the limits of parental authority and foregrounding children's capacity to shape the crisis in the present. As Marco Caracciolo observes, children's

perspectives perform important cultural work by “overturn[ing] the culturally dominant framing of the child in the climate crisis—namely, as inherently vulnerable and therefore powerless without parental care” (146), portraying young protagonists not only as future “inheritors” of the earth but also as political agents. This reconfiguration of children’s independence, Caracciolo argues, is closely tied to the use of internal focalization, through which events are rendered through the experiential perspective of the child. One consequence of this shift is the displacement of adults’ nostalgic attachment to a pre-apocalyptic past, as climate fiction centered on child perspectives often refuses the longing for a world imagined as stable and familiar—a longing that frequently structures adult responses to ecological crisis. This dynamic is particularly evident in *A Children’s Bible*, where adult characters remain fixated on the loss of a privileged way of life while the children orient themselves toward adaptation and survival in a transformed environment. In this sense, Millet’s novel resonates with Verlie’s observation that, for privileged subjects in the Global North, climate distress is often tied to grief for the anticipated loss of modern, materially secure ways of life.

By contrast, in *How Beautiful We Were*, nostalgic longing for a lost past plays a far less prominent role: adult characters are not invested in recovering a world that was never stable or just to begin with, and the children’s perspective is therefore not framed against an idealized pre-crisis past. Across these different configurations, child focalization reorients climate affect away from loss-centered nostalgia and toward forms of engagement attentive to present conditions and future possibilities, cultivating “adaptation and acceptance of an unstable future” (Caracciolo 146). Finally, child focalization opens up a further line of inquiry developed more extensively in *A Children’s Bible* than in *How Beautiful We Were*: the reimagining of community and materiality through the erosion of binaries central to Western modernity, such as human versus animal or material versus psychological. As Caracciolo argues, child-centered perspectives can offer productive ways of negotiating the uncertainty of the climate crisis by engaging, at the level of narrative form, with ideas central to nonhuman-oriented theories, including those articulated by Stacy Alaimo and Jane Bennett. In such texts, human embodiment itself is rethought in relation to nonhuman materiality, as children acquire narrative agency through internal focalization.

While the child’s experiential perspective unsettles adultist assumptions and reframes grief and adaptation, both texts further

complicate the relationship between individual experience and collective response by turning to forms of collective narration that foreground the emergence of a shared subjectivity shaped by ecological crisis. Both employ what James terms “inconstant we-narratives,” narrative configurations in which the narrator oscillates between the subjecthood of a narrating-I and a narrating-we, highlighting the dual nature of agency in the Anthropocene. Before discussing James’s formulation, it is useful to clarify the formal distinction between we-narration and we-narrative. In Natalya Bekhta’s account (2020), passages of we-narration—that is, narration employing the first-person plural pronoun—may appear within texts structured around other narrative situations. By contrast, we-narrative designates texts in which collective subjectivity constitutes the dominant mode of narration and the “we” resists identification with singular identities within the group.

The political implications of collective narration—central to this article—become particularly clear when considered through Brian Richardson’s contextual approach to first-person plural narration. In *Unnatural Voices*, Richardson argues that first-person plural narration is a flexible and historically persistent narrative technique: rather than treating the instability of the “we” as a formal limitation, Richardson emphasizes the historical conditions that shape the use of collective voice, showing that first-person plural narration has long been mobilized in texts concerned with the articulation of collective identities, particularly within feminist, socialist, and postcolonial traditions. The shifting membership and unstable boundaries of the “we” become a resource rather than a limitation, enabling the representation of emergent forms of communal consciousness as well as the tensions and internal differences that structure them.

As Ruth Maxey notes in her survey of the rise of first-person plural narration in contemporary American fiction, the pronoun “we” remains both enigmatic and politically charged. The collective voice can be simultaneously inclusive and exclusive, suggesting multiple possible collectivities—generational, racialized, ideological, or national—so that the question of who constitutes the “we” becomes politically consequential. This point becomes particularly relevant in the two novels examined here: in *A Children’s Bible*, the boundaries of the collective remain relatively stable, as the narrative “we” consistently refers to a clearly identifiable group of adolescents contrasted with their parents; in *How Beautiful We Were*, the collective voice assumes a far more shifting and destabilizing form, functioning as a powerful means of articulating communal

consciousness and collective struggle and registering both solidarities and internal tensions within a community resisting colonial and corporate exploitation.

Placed within the context of the Anthropocene, the political implications of collective narration become particularly visible. It foregrounds the sociopolitical and material inequalities that structure this epoch while offering a counternarrative to the oft-implicit assumption that the European American subject represents the universal collective agent of the Anthropocene. This perspective resonates with broader discussions of human agency in the Anthropocene, which call for recognition of forms of collectivity that exceed individual action and require agency to be understood across multiple scales simultaneously (Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History"). At the same time, as scholars such as Nixon and LeMenager emphasize, such accounts must remain attentive to the profound inequalities that structure human societies in this epoch.

Seen from this perspective, it is useful to return to Bekhta's concept of the *we*-narrative, as such narratives are particularly well-suited to register both the supraindividual force of collective agency and the internal differences that shape and fracture it, illuminating the distinctions between a narrating collective and those groups or individuals that fall outside its boundaries. Yet, as James suggests, the Anthropocene also invites a reconsideration of Bekhta's claim that *we*-narratives can only be understood as texts in which the "*we*" is "never identified as 'I' and does not call for such identification" (178). Debates on collective human agency indicate that a nuanced understanding of action in this epoch must account for both supraindividual collectives and the diverse actions of individuals—some driving the crisis, others mitigating it, and others disproportionately affected by it. In this context, inconstant *we*-narratives extend Bekhta's model by enabling readers to oscillate between individual and collective subjecthood, allowing the imaginative "zooming in and zooming out" that Chakrabarty ("Whose Anthropocene" 111) identifies as central to grasping Anthropocene agency. Pushing this insight further, James argues that inconstant *we*-narratives are particularly effective because they "move between an emotionally rich narrating-I and a more unknowable yet coherent *we*-group that acts together," providing readers with a position from which to move "quickly between a familiar singular subjecthood and a more abstract supraindividual collective with which it is difficult to empathize" (160). This dual focus renders the interplay of personal and collective subjecthood—and the affective stakes of ecological crisis—both narratively and emotionally

legible. The two novels deploy this strategy differently, reflecting the distinct social and historical contexts in which they are situated: while Millet's novel foregrounds the affective dimensions of collective climate experience, Mbue's postcolonial narrative mobilizes the collective voice to illuminate the unequal distribution of environmental harm and the political struggles that emerge from it.

Collectivizing Climate Affect: Millet's *A Children's Bible*

In *A Children's Bible*, Millet situates the protagonists' coming-of-age within a world already marked by ecological decline. Early in the novel, after the group of adolescents and their parents has been introduced, a character remarks that "some weather's on the way" (47), referring to an out-of-season hurricane. The storm strikes in the following chapter and acts as a catalytic event that accelerates the young protagonists' maturation, propelling them beyond initial shock and mourning in the face of perceived planetary decline. Yet the temporal structure of this process complicates the conventional trajectory of the climate *Bildungsroman*. The novel does not locate the protagonists' awakening in the spectacular moment of catastrophe; rather, the opening chapters already convey a pervasive sense that the characters inhabit a world in terminal decline. This sensibility emerges during the adolescents' retreat to a nearby beach, where they articulate a mode of environmental perception grounded in ecological embeddedness—"[w]e respected the lake and stream and most of all the ocean"—and in the autonomy of nonhuman agency—"[t]he clouds and the earth, from whose hidden burrows and sharp grass a swarm of wasps might rise, an infestation of stinging ants, or suddenly blueberries" (12). From the outset, the nonhuman world, as refracted through the children's perspective, is thus figured as a dynamic and generative field whose emergences remain fundamentally unpredictable.

At the same time, the group acknowledges that "the clock was ticking" (13) and that their species has "hung out way past its expiration date" (23). This awareness is explicitly generational: the adults appear to them as "a cautionary tale" (13), embodiments of collective failure rather than authority. It also extends to an even younger cohort, represented most clearly by Evie's little brother, Jack, whose recurring nightmares register an anxiety he cannot yet fully understand. Evie wonders whether—and how—to explain the situation to him: "[t]he end of the world, I didn't think he'd take it so well. But it was a Santa Claus situation" (27). Climate knowledge is thus framed as an inevitable disillusionment, akin to the loss of

childhood belief, emerging as a rite of passage within the novel's coming-of-age trajectory. Crucially, the affective catalyst of this maturation is not generic grief or mourning, nor self-centered anger. The earliest emotions in the novel are instead *frustration* and *rage* directed at the parents, who appear unable—or unwilling—to confront the gravity of the situation. As Evie observes, they seemed unaware that “there were urgent subjects” and “[q]uestions that needed to be asked” (4), dismissing any serious comment from the children. From the outset, the adults function not only as a generational foil but also as representatives of a broader systemic order implicated in the climate crisis. It is precisely the adolescents' growing detachment from parental authority that enables an alternative mode of action and, with it, their maturation. In this context, coming-of-age entails not only ecological awareness but also political reorientation—a refusal of inherited frameworks and the assertion of autonomous agency.

This political reorientation is reinforced by the use of child focalization, which destabilizes the culturally dominant image of the child as inherently vulnerable and dependent on adult protection. The result is a gradual inversion of generational authority: while adults continue to frame the children as incapable of understanding or managing the crisis, the novel repeatedly demonstrates the opposite. The children display lucidity and a capacity for collective organization, while the adults retreat into denial, alcohol consumption, and eventually stronger drugs. Through scenes in which adult authority is undermined by intoxication and an unwillingness to confront the unfolding catastrophe, the novel systematically dismantles the normative association between childhood and passivity by revealing vulnerability as a condition that is distributed rather than generationally fixed, while competence and responsibility increasingly migrate toward the children. A second effect of child focalization is the destabilization of adults' nostalgic attachment to a pre-apocalyptic world imagined as stable and recoverable. In the novel, the adults remain oriented toward the restoration of familiar social structures and comforts, even as the material conditions that sustained them have collapsed. Their responses to the unfolding catastrophe reveal an attachment to institutional frameworks and lifestyles that no longer function in the altered environment. After the storm, when the group relocates from the rented vacation house to a large mansion owned by one of the families, some adults respond to the new circumstances through the language of leisure and domestic comfort: “I'm going straight into the pool,” Evie's mother announces as they arrive. “And then the

Jacuzzi. I hear it's got a glass roof on it" (201–02). Elsewhere, Evie notices one mother "absentmindedly tidying. As though the cottage was a rental, and we had to leave it clean" (195), reproducing the routines of middle-class normality even amid ecological disruption. In contrast, the children orient themselves toward adapting to the unstable conditions and material uncertainty of the emerging world rather than restoring a lost order. Evie captures this shift when she observes that "Water's going where it isn't allowed. Dryness was a temporary state. Like safety" (65), suggesting that safety itself has become provisional rather than guaranteed. After the group relocates to the mansion, the children gradually reorganize it as a self-sufficient base, discussing seeds and crop plants, dividing tasks, and planning for the property's self-sufficiency. By late winter, the vegetables they eat come from hydroponic systems and an indoor garden established within the house.

Child focalization further allows the novel to rethink the relationship between the human and the nonhuman by unsettling the binary that separates an active human subject from a passive natural world. Through children's perspectives, the boundaries between human embodiment and environmental materiality appear far more porous. At one point, Evie imagines her own body dissolving into the surrounding world: once her "molecules had dispersed," she reflects, she would remain "part of the timeless," so that "the sky and the ocean would also be me," with particles "that had once been others and now moved through us" (36–37). Human existence is thus figured as continuous with the circulation of matter rather than separate from it. This sensibility is most clearly articulated by the youngest members of the group, Jack and his friend Shel, who attempt to rescue animals during the storm in imitation of Noah's ark. Through her interactions with Jack, Evie gradually comes to share his ecological sensibility: as they lead a group of goats into the trees to be killed, she notes that they seem "no different from our dogs, back at the great house" (162–63). This moment suggests that the novel's most explicitly anti-speciesist sensibility emerges among the youngest children: still in the process of becoming, they occupy a position not yet fully aligned with the adult human subject, enabling them to imagine forms of relationality that exceed the human–nonhuman divide.

Taken together, these elements show that child focalization in *A Children's Bible* reorients the novel's temporal and affective horizon, shifting attention away from nostalgic attachments to a lost past and toward adaptation within an unstable present. In doing so, the children's perspective politicizes time in a way that recalls the

temporal consciousness Louise Knops identifies in youth climate activism, particularly in movements such as Fridays for Future, where grief and indignation are directed toward futures imagined as threatened or stolen. Rather than lamenting a lost Eden, the novel instead foregrounds new attachments to the planet as a shared and living collective.

This reorientation of climate affect is reinforced formally through the novel's use of the inconstant we-narrator. As discussed earlier, this form oscillates between a collective narrating-we and a narrating-I, allowing readers to apprehend both the scale of collective experience and the emotional immediacy of singular subjectivity. Significantly, James introduces this concept through *A Children's Bible* itself, which she reads as a key example of how such oscillation renders collective climate experience both affectively legible and politically meaningful. In the novel, the collective "we" is first defined through a contrast between the children and their parents. While the younger characters are alert and responsive to environmental change, the adults are schematic figures defined by denial and inertia, clinging to familiar comforts that signal their inability to confront the crisis. This contrast is reinforced by an asymmetry in the distribution of individuality. Although the children themselves form a collective, it is composed of distinct and emotionally legible subjects, whereas the parents function as a flattened group whose members remain largely interchangeable. As James notes, the text effectively "denies them any sense of individualization" (164), reinforcing the novel's critique of the older generation's failure to engage with ecological collapse. Crucially, the children's collective is also the novel's narrating-we, positioning it as the only collective subjectivity through which the unfolding crisis becomes intelligible.

Within the collective of young characters, however, Evie's individual narration provides the primary point of access to the group's shared experience. Although the text emphasizes collective action, it is Evie's narration that enables readers to engage emotionally with these events, placing her in a hybrid position between individual perception and collective participation. In this way, the inconstant we-narrator collectivizes climate affect by moving between Evie's individual perception and the shared voice of the adolescent group. Emotions initially experienced at the level of individual subjectivity are thus reframed as part of a generational "we," defined against the inertia and denial of the adult world and illuminating the contrast between the narrating collective and those who remain outside it.

Yet the contrast between children and parents does not imply that climate distress is limited to the younger generation, since the novel repeatedly shows that the crisis is deeply disorienting for adults as well. As Evie observes, once “[the parents’] habitats collapsed they had no familiar terrain. No map. No equipment. No tools” (206), leaving them without the social and material coordinates that had previously structured their lives. What distinguishes the two generations is not the presence of climate distress but how it is experienced and managed. Among the adults, it tends to produce paralysis, expressed through denial, intoxication, and nostalgic attachment to a world that no longer exists. As the children adapt to a changing world, they attempt to confront these emotions collectively rather than suppress them, introducing what Jack calls their “missings,” moments in which losses are openly acknowledged instead of denied, and it becomes important—“for the parents especially” (217)—to recognize and speak about what has disappeared. The practice of the “missings” thus counters Verlie’s “greenhouse gaslighting,” by insisting on the open acknowledgment of loss. Even this effort, however, reveals the persistence of the generational divide. When invited to name what they miss, some adults respond with nostalgic inventories of past pleasures: “Bars,” one parent answers, listing the various places they once frequented (217). While the adults remain oriented toward the recovery of a vanished world, the children seek ways of acknowledging loss without becoming immobilized by it, and their response gradually shifts toward moral outrage—an affect directed toward identifiable targets and capable of translating distress into political judgment. This indignation is increasingly directed at the children’s own parents, who are accused of generational responsibility: “We blame you for everything” (193) and “You gave up the world . . . You let them turn it all to shit” (193). Although addressed to the parents, the accusation clearly extends beyond them. The parents belong to an educated liberal milieu—professors, artists, intellectuals who teach feminist theory (including Evie’s mother, who continues teaching even amid catastrophe on the grounds that “feminist theory [doesn’t] rest” [204]), discuss workers’ paradises, and acknowledge the destructive logic of capitalism (the “nail in the coffin,” as one parent puts it [67]). Yet they continue to live according to what Evie describes as “business as usual” (28). Their failure is therefore not merely personal but structural: they represent a privileged class capable of criticizing the system while remaining invested in the forms of consumption and comfort that sustain it. In this way, the children’s climate anxiety crystallizes into moral

outrage directed not only at parental authority but also at the broader social order it embodies.

Collective Narration for Collective Liberation: Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*

Nevertheless, the collective that emerges in *A Children's Bible* remains marked by important limitations. Evie and her peers are the children of affluent, upper-middle-class liberals, and their experience of ecological collapse unfolds from a position of considerable privilege. Even as the novel criticizes the failures of their parents' generation, the group itself remains closed and socially homogeneous, and does not extend beyond the social space that produced it. The children explicitly reject the behaviors they associate with their parents—"They shamed us. They were a cautionary tale" (13)—yet traces of the same privileged outlook occasionally surface in their own actions. Although they condemn the consumerism of the adult generation, their survival remains embedded in infrastructures of affluence and capitalist production, from the rented vacation house where the novel begins to the mansion that later becomes their refuge. This contradiction appears already in the opening pages, when the adolescents complain about sharing a single room during their vacation and one of them compares their situation to Indigenous peoples confined to reservations, only to be immediately corrected by the adults for using an "insensitive" metaphor (6–7). The exchange captures a milieu invested in the language of progressive politics while remaining insulated from the material conditions it invokes. More broadly, the novel illustrates a tension already noted in the introduction: although ecological distress is often framed in generational terms, such framing rarely accounts for the unequal distribution of vulnerability shaping experiences of climate change. While *A Children's Bible* offers a sharp critique of affluent liberal environments and of the capitalist structures that sustain them, the world it depicts remains strikingly narrow. It is precisely this limitation that becomes central in Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*.

Like Millet's novel, *How Beautiful We Were* can be read as a climate *Bildungsroman*, in which maturation is catalyzed by ecological loss. Unlike in *A Children's Bible*, where climate distress is tied to the anticipated loss of materially secure ways of life characteristic of privileged subjects in the Global North, nostalgic longing for a lost past plays little role in *How Beautiful We Were*, as neither adults nor children are invested in recovering a world that was never

stable or fair in the first place, and ecological devastation is inseparable from longer histories of colonial extraction and corporate exploitation shaping life in Kosawa. The trajectories of maturation therefore diverge: while Evie and her peers move toward adaptation within a transformed environment, Thula's coming-of-age transforms grief and anger into deliberate political action, and this divergence is mirrored in the novels' use of the inconstant we-narrator. In *A Children's Bible*, the oscillation between Evie's narration and the collective voice renders shared climate affect emotionally legible, producing what might be described as a form of affective collectivization. In *How Beautiful We Were*, the collective voice foregrounds the uneven universality of climate change, exposing the historical and political structures that distribute environmental harm unevenly. The inconstant "we" thus mediates collectivity in the age of climate change in two distinct ways: in Millet, by collectivizing affect; in Mbue, by rendering climate injustice structurally legible.

Thula performs a function similar to Evie's, as her individual narration provides an affective point of access to a wider collective experience. Like Evie, Thula's coming-of-age is catalyzed by environmental grief: her early memories do not register the loss of a world she once inhabited but the gradual realization that another world had existed before extractive violence remade it. Recalling her parents' warnings to stay away from the river, she wonders how she and her friends could otherwise have known that rivers were not "ordinarily covered with oil and toxic waste," or that the smoke making their "eyes watery and noses runny" (28) was not simply part of childhood. What emerges here is not only anticipatory grief for an endangered future but also grief for an ecological reality Thula has never been allowed to know. Her coming-of-age therefore unfolds at the intersection of climate and postcolonial grief, transforming inherited memories of loss into indignation and political resolve.

Unlike Millet's novel, *How Beautiful We Were* complicates the interplay between individual and collective voice in multiple ways. One is the multiplication of first-person perspectives: while Thula remains the central figure and primary entry point into the younger generation's experience, the novel periodically shifts to other voices within her family, allowing the story of Kosawa to emerge across different generational and social positions. A chapter narrated by Thula's mother, Sahel, examines the gendered structures shaping life in the village. After her husband's disappearance, she assumes the role of family head even as the men of Kosawa insist

that women are “built to endure” (147). Her account shows how environmental devastation produced by colonial extractivism intersects with patriarchal expectations and limited reproductive autonomy. Concerned about Thula’s future, she imagines her daughter’s life primarily in terms of marriage and motherhood, hoping she will learn, as she herself has, to “find contentment with whatever life offers her” (162). The chapter narrated by Thula’s grandmother, Yaya, situates Kosawa’s ecological crisis within a longer history of colonial violence. Recalling the arrival of European missionaries who promised to bring the villagers “out of the darkness [they] didn’t know [they] were living in” (219), Yaya traces the layered histories of exploitation shaping the region—from the legacy of the Atlantic slave trade to forced labor on rubber plantations, where “for the sake of rubber, a generation of our young men was wiped away” (223). Through these shifting perspectives, the novel embeds environmental devastation within a broader web of gendered, historical, and colonial inequalities. At the same time, these voices often exceed singular subjectivity, gesturing toward a collective “we” that links past and present histories of colonial violence.

Another way *How Beautiful We Were* complicates the interplay between individual and collective voice is through the shifting composition of the pronoun “we,” recalling Richardson’s observation that the narrative force of the first-person plural often derives from the instability of its boundaries. Unlike in *A Children’s Bible*, where the collective voice remains relatively stable and opposed to the adult generation, the “we” in Mbue’s novel is far more fluid. While the opposing pronoun “they” consistently designates colonial and corporate power—most visibly the US oil company Pexton and the political structures that protect it—the referent of “we” changes throughout the novel. At times, it expands beyond the children to include the adult inhabitants of Kosawa, as when the villagers distrust the corrupt leader Woja Beki, who claims he is helping “us to reclaim our land” (5), the pronouns here referring to the community as a whole. At other moments, however, the collective voice clearly refers only to the children: “we worried for our entire families, though the disease preferred the bodies of children” (8); “we were young, but we knew death to be impartial” (9). The collective voice therefore expands and contracts across the novel, registering both moments of shared resistance and internal tensions within the community.

The composition of the child collective itself changes as the story unfolds. In the early sections, it clearly includes Thula among

the group; later, as she leaves the village to pursue an education in the United States, her position becomes more ambiguous, and the collective voice increasingly appears to belong to the boys who remain in Kosawa. The connection nevertheless persists through the letters she sends home, read aloud and circulated within the village, which she signs by reaffirming her belonging to the group: "I'll always be one of us" (213). At the same time, Thula's departure expands the scope of the collective beyond Kosawa. Through her experiences in the United States—particularly through activist networks she encounters in New York—the village's struggle becomes connected to broader movements for environmental justice. In her letters, she refers to communities facing environmental violence in different forms: places where pipelines cross sacred land, where children drink poisoned water, and where coastal territories disappear into the sea. These references evoke recognizable sites—from Standing Rock to Flint—linking Kosawa's story to wider geographies of environmental injustice and to communities shaped by colonial and extractive histories. Although Thula rarely uses the pronoun "we" explicitly in these contexts, moments such as her declaration "we're here and we're angry" (212) allow the collective voice to extend beyond the village, rendering the referent of "we" deliberately ambiguous and opening it to a broader transnational community resisting extractive capitalism.

Yet the collective voice never stabilizes into a unified subject. In the novel's later sections, "we" increasingly refers to the young men who remain in Kosawa, and their narration occasionally reproduces gendered assumptions about Thula's role. Even after she returns from the United States and emerges as a leader of the struggle for environmental justice and decolonization, her authority continues to be measured against expectations of marriage and motherhood. At one point, her male companions sedate her and perform a ritual intended to impregnate her, convinced that "nothing could make her respectable besides motherhood and marriage" (308). The fluctuating composition of the collective thus reveals both solidarities and fractures within the movement, showing how the narrative "we" can simultaneously articulate communal resistance and expose the exclusions that persist within it.

These tensions point to the broader political stakes of collective narration in contemporary climate fiction. Taken together, these two novels demonstrate how contemporary climate fiction mobilizes collective narration to politicize climate distress rather than treating it as a purely private or psychological condition. The narrative strategies examined here participate in what Louise Knops

describes as the capacity of climate affect to politicize time, orienting emotions toward futures perceived as threatened or stolen while refusing nostalgic attachments to a lost, stable past. In *A Children's Bible*, the oscillation between Evie's individual narration and the collective voice renders shared climate affect emotionally legible, producing a form of affective collectivization among the younger generation that gradually crystallizes into moral outrage directed not only at parental authority but at the broader social order it represents. Yet, as Verlie's work on feeling climate injustice suggests, climate distress must also be understood as unevenly distributed across social and historical contexts. *How Beautiful We Were* brings this dimension into sharper focus: through its shifting collective voice, the novel exposes the colonial and corporate structures that distribute environmental harm unevenly and channels grief into collective political action. The inconstant "we" thus mediates collectivity in the age of climate change in two distinct ways: in Millet, by collectivizing affect; in Mbue, by rendering climate injustice structurally legible. If *A Children's Bible* demonstrates how collective narration can make climate affect legible as a shared generational experience, *How Beautiful We Were* points more explicitly toward the political horizon of collective narration for collective liberation.

NOTES

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1. In this article, "contemporary climate fiction" refers to the body of fiction that emerged in the early twenty-first-century around increasing cultural and critical attention to anthropogenic climate change as a central narrative concern. The two novels examined, both published shortly after the rise of youth-led climate movements such as Fridays for Future, are particularly attentive to intergenerational conflict and to the politicization of climate affect in the context of environmental activism and ecological breakdown.

2. On formal strategies that function as engines of environmental affect in contemporary fiction, see Heather Houser (2014); see also Bladow and Ladino (2018) on affective ecocriticism.

3. By "politicization," I refer to the process through which climate distress becomes legible not merely as an individualized psychological condition but also as a collective response to systemic injustice and ecological precarity. Similarly, following Knops, to "politicize time" means to frame threatened futures not as abstract sources of personal anxiety but as

contested political horizons shaped by historical responsibility and shared struggle.

4. In this article, I use climate distress in a broad sense, following Verlie's use of the term as an umbrella concept for the diverse affective harms associated with climate change, ranging from worry to post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and chronic anxiety. While climate distress functions here as a general term, I occasionally refer to more specific experiences such as climate anxiety, climate grief, and solastalgia (see Pihkala 2022).

5. This observation applies to other affective responses to climate change as well: for instance, in scholarship on ecological mourning—the process of grieving environmental degradation—Stef Craps notes that it has largely focused on individuals' lived experiences, leaving the intergenerational dimension, so central to the Anthropocene, largely invisible.

6. On the intergenerational dimensions of climate fiction for both adult and young readers, see Xausa 2020, 2023a, 2023b, 2025; Buekens, Caracciolo, and Vanhove; Goga and Guanio-Uluru; Rydsjö and Hval.

7. For a more extended discussion of Mbue's novel see Xausa 2023b; here I return to it primarily in the final section, where it serves to illuminate some of the tensions that remain unresolved in *A Children's Bible*.

8. The critical reception of the two texts diverges, as scholarship on Mbue largely focuses on environmental activism, grassroots resistance, and decolonial practices, whereas criticism on Millet more often foregrounds intergenerational conflict rather than organized forms of resistance (see Biana, Oketch, and Kimathi; Xausa 2023b; Nare, Moopi, and Nyambi; Kanu).

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