

COMING-OF-AGE AS ECOCITIZENS IN YOUNG ADULT CLIMATE FICTION: SACI LLOYD'S *THE CARBON DIARIES 2015* AND *2017*

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Abstract

This article considers the threat of environmental destruction in YA dystopian imagination by providing a close reading of Saci Lloyd's *The Carbon Diaries 2015* (2008) and *The Carbon Diaries 2017* (2010) that particularly considers whether these texts espouse radical social change and whether they offer hope or despair. First, the article demonstrates that Lloyd's novels do not merely portray climate change as a backdrop for human drama, but rather attempt to disentangle the environmental crisis from the post-political sphere (Swyngedouw 2010) where humanity as a whole is under threat. While its protagonists learn to cope with ecological uncertainty and the multidimensional challenges of climate change, indeed, they also come to terms with the social and political dimensions of climate change. Second, the article claims that one of the most important features of these two novels is their attempt to explore the challenges faced by the younger generations when dealing with the contemporary climate challenge. Young people in fact bear a disproportionate burden of the environmental crises the world faces today and are subject to climate anxiety. Moreover, they are not only disproportionately impacted by climate change, but their agency and visions of the future are often placed under erasure discursively. Lloyd's novels, instead, provide a young adult perspective on the uneven universality of climate change. Finally, the article suggests that the presence of utopian hope at the conclusion of the novels does not provide a consoling and comforting happy ending but helps readers to come to terms with an imperfect world. The article's close reading of *The Carbon Diaries 2015* and *2017*, therefore, attempts to underscore the novels' projection of a possible future where a radical systemic change is envisaged.

Keywords: Climate fiction, YA dystopian fiction, Saci Lloyd, hope, systemic change

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In an article published in 2008 in the *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, John Green states that dystopian fiction for young adults constitutes an increasing market. The previous year had indeed seen the publication of more than a dozen post-apocalyptic young adult novels creating possible futures where the consequences of our unsustainable lifestyles are taken to the extreme (“Spoiler alert: It’s gonna be bad” 2008, online). Among this rising sea, he claims, Susan Beth Pfeffer’s *The Dead and the Gone* (2008) and Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* (2008, 2009, 2010, and 2020) stand apart. YA dystopias make extensive use of narrative techniques that enable young readers’ identification with the narrator and place them close to the action – see, for example, the use of first-person narrator or diary entries –, and engage with pressing global concerns, such as the relationship between self and technology, government oppression, conformity, and climate change. The environmental and climate crises are indeed becoming increasingly popular in dystopian YA fiction: see, among many other titles, Julie Bertagna’s *Exodus* (2002) and *Zenith* (2008), Susan Beth Pfeffer’s *Last Survivors* series (2008-2010), Paolo Bacigalupi’s *Ship Breaker* (2010), and Cameron Stracher’s *The Water Wars* (2011). According to Geraldine Massey and Clare Bradford, one of the primary functions of environmental texts for young adult is to “socialize young people into becoming the responsible and empathetic adults of tomorrow by positioning readers as ecocitizens, dedicated to both sustainable development in the local sphere and also to global responsibility” (2011, 109). In their introduction to *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults: Brave New Teenagers* (2013), Balaka Basu, Katherine R. Broad, and Carrie Hintz stress that the desire to provide both education and escape is one of the distinctive feature of YA dystopias – and YA literature more broadly –, and they break down their analysis into three major areas of contention: “how do these texts balance didacticism with pleasure,” whether they “espouse radical political change, or [...] mask an inner conservatism,” and whether they “offer their readers hope or despair” (2). Within this context, this article considers the threat of environmental destruction in YA dystopian imagination and provides a close reading of Saci Lloyd’s *The Carbon Diaries 2015* (*TCD 2015*, published in 2008) and *The Carbon Diaries 2017* (*TCD 2017*, published in 2010) that particularly considers the second and third areas of contention outlined by Basu, Broad, and Hintz.

TCD 2015 is set in what was, at the time of publication (2008), a future Britain under carbon rationing. According to Miller, Hutton, and Braithwaite, at the time of publication this novel “offered a small window of time before [its] designated point of no return, thus creating a sense of immediacy in order to bolster the impact of their environmental warnings to readers” (2017, 54). This dystopian scenario revolves around Laura Brown and the difficulties she and her family, friends, and neighbors encounter as they adjust to the new governance of carbon spending and face increasing environmental and social disaster exacerbated by the progression of climate change. Its sequel, *TCD 2017*, characterized by a darker and more urgent tone, revolves around Laura’s band, The Dirty Angels, and the topic of political radicalization. Lloyd combines two genres popular

among teenagers and young adults, as both novels feature elements of the *Bildungsroman* and the critical dystopia. What is narrated in *TCD 2015* and *2017* is indeed a classic coming-of-age story in the form of a diary. Its author, Laura, is a 16-year-old girl who is often at odds with her dysfunctional family, made up of her parents Nick and Julia and her sister Kim. Through Laura's entries, we learn about the increasing number of extreme weather events and subsequent social tensions, we observe the deterioration of her parents' marriage, and we follow her coming-of-age as a mature young adult and especially as an ecocitizen. On the other hand, Lloyd's novels can also be interpreted as critical dystopias in that they "maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work" (Baccolini and Moylan 2003, 7), as I will emphasize in the concluding remarks. Over the ensuing paragraphs, this article will therefore provide a close reading of *TCD 2015* and *2017* that will attempt to underscore the novels' projection of a possible future where a radical systemic change is envisaged.

Climate change as a systemic crisis

TCD 2015 opens on the eve of the new nationwide carbon rationing era: from January 8 2015 on, all British citizens will have a carbon allowance of 200 Carbon Points to spend on travel, heat, and food. Besides, products such as clothes, technology, and books will have the Carbon Points built into the price. Laura's entries make clear to the readers how the nation ended up in this situation: whilst the initial international goal was to impose a 60% carbon reduction by 2030, after the "Great Storm" devastated the country the British government decided to proceed fifteen years earlier, in the hope to inspire similar climate politics in Europe and the rest of the world. As Laura remarks, "after the Great Storm everything changed, and it all became more hectic" (3). As her normal adolescent life rapidly becomes a thing of the past, she seems to be the only member of her family to acknowledge the inevitability of climate change: "you never think it's gonna happen to you, but all that pollution and dirty fumes and flights and factories and shit we don't need and suddenly there you are, a stupid girl sitting alone on some steps" (298). What emerges from these lines is Laura's acceptance of the reality and anthropogenic nature of climate change, which allows us to define Lloyd's novels as works of climate fiction. Indeed, what distinguishes this burgeoning transcultural phenomenon from other fictions exploring the aftermath of both natural and human-induced climate change is that it takes as a point of departure anthropogenic global warming. As such, these works are inscribed into an Anthropocene framework that emphasises the geological dimension of humanity's emissions of greenhouse gases (Andersen 2020, 5). Defining climate fiction as a literary genre is not an easy task, as it lacks the stylistic conventions and the plot formulas that characterise other types of genre fiction. Including both novels and films that borrow from different genres, it can be defined as "a distinctive body of cultural work which engages with anthropogenic climate change, exploring the phenomenon not just in terms

of setting, but with regard to psychological and social issues” (Goodbody and Johns-Putra 2019, 2).

There are plenty of references in both novels to the Anthropocene as a multidimensional challenge as well as a systemic crisis composed of several coalescing indicators in which global warming is only one element of concern. The first year of rationing is indeed exacerbated by an increase of extreme weather events because of climate change: the winter, to start with, brings massive blizzards all over Southern Europe. During these first months, however, the link between global warming and severe snowstorms still seems counterintuitive to some of the characters: “there’s heavy snow across Europe again. [...] It’s so surreal seeing white people crying and huddling in shelters in places where you used to go on holiday. ‘Er, what happened to global warming?’ muttered Adi” (Lloyd, *TCD* 2015 52). What follows is a severe draught in the summer, with private water cut off by British government and a standpipe installed “for every 20 homes” (179); storm floods, finally, happen in the fall of 2015. When the Thames barrier fails and London experiences severe flooding, Laura’s neighbour and friend Kieran reacts once again by questioning the reality of global warming: “What happened to global warming? [...] We’re just going to have to rethink the whole thing now that London’s turning into a big river” (270). Like her friends, Laura struggles with the unpredictability and diversity of climate change: due to the myriad and variable ways that climate change can manifest, being prepared becomes far more difficult. “We’re messed up” (278), she exclaims when she realises that in the summer entries of her diary she was praying for rain, and a few months later she is praying for none. Her heart “sinks” (255) as she grasps that yet another disaster is coming and that they “just go from one crisis to the next” (275) – including a Cholera outbreak in London. Her own struggle to cope with such unprecedented uncertainty mirrors the government’s strategy of resilience and adaptation that reveals its inadequacy in front of the high level of unpredictability that characterises the Anthropocene. To give one example, when facing the possibility that London could be hit by a storm surge and the Thames barriers might not hold, the government’s failure to take meaningful climate action is made clear through the words of Laura’s neighbour ‘Loud Dad’:

‘They don’t want to put any more money in – the current barrier ran seventy-five per cent over budget so the Government line is that surge-tide interaction is a proven fact – that it’s impossible for a surge to happen at the same time as high tide.’ He shook his head. ‘But it’s not impossible, it’s just *unlikely*. And if it *does* happen, the Barrier’s too small. (276-277, italics original)

A few days later, the Thames Barrier fails and is unable to protect London from floods. By the end of the first novel, however, we are left with the impression that extreme weather events like these are not yet considered part of a systemic crisis, that climate change is not yet being treated as the emergency it is, and that strategies to cope with climate change, such as rationing, are not going to be “this

bad for ever. [...] [They are] just super intense now, maybe for a decade ... but then green engines and fuels'll sort us out" (224). In other words, systemic change and climate action are not a central feature of *The Carbon Diaries 2015*.

Lloyd places a whole year between her two novels, and we meet Laura again on January 2, 2017. Her entries explain that the water keeps on rising, and, during the previous year, the Thames flooded 34 times: in fact, coexisting with ecological disturbance has become a daily experience for many. The condition in which Laura, her family, and friends live could be described as the "everyday Anthropocene" mentioned by Stephanie LeManeger in *Climate Change and the Struggle for Genre*. LeManeger describes it as the "present tense, lived time of the Anthropocene" and focuses her attention on "what it means to live, day by day, through climate shift and the economical and sociological injuries that underwrite it" (2017, 225). *TCD 2017's* protagonists are not only learning to cope with ecological uncertainty and the multidimensional challenges of climate change, but they also come to terms with the social and political dimension of climate change.

One of the most innovative features of Lloyd's novels — and especially of *TCD 2017* — is a discursive construction of the Anthropocene that does not fail to engage in social criticism, as many other works of climate fiction tend to do. As suggested by Michael Svoboda (2016), many apocalyptic depictions of climate change tend to cast the environmental crisis in a post-political sphere where discussion is reserved to "experts, bureaucrats, and executives" and "choice is ideologically reduced to capitalism or chaos" (53). In this post-political situation (Swyngedouw 2010), the political concerns of climate change — such as questions of uneven distribution of resources — are made invisible, and the environmental crisis is framed as merely a technocratic problem to be solved. Erik Swyngedouw lists four symptoms that characterise such condition: first, there is a widespread scientific consensus that climate change represents a real threat to human civilisation. Second, climate change is often represented as a universal threat to humanity as a whole: as we are all potential victims and global warming is socially homogenising, there is no space for politics. Third, responses to the climate crisis take the form of "self-management, self-organization and controlled self-disciplining [...] under the aegis of a non-disputed liberal-capitalist order" (223), in which individuals are asked to accept personal responsibility rather than question systemic asymmetries that institutionalise environmental exploitation. Fourth, the post-political environmental condition is characterised by the continuous invocation of fear and apocalyptic imaginaries that disavow and displace social conflict and antagonisms.¹¹ Besides creating a sense of emergency, apocalyptic climate narratives cast the relationship between human and non-human natures as one of antagonism, with nature as a threatening force retaliating against human beings. As such, Sherilyn MacGregor has suggested that "the dominant framing of climate change has produced a depoliticising view of nature as the enemy" (2014, 621). On a similar note, Matthew Schneider-Mayerson laments the elision of climate justice from the emerging canon of climate change

fiction, which usually portrays climatic destabilisation primarily as a problem for the “monolithic and flattened ‘we’ of homo sapiens” (Schneider-Mayerson 2019, 2), a universal human subject that is mostly male, white, and well-educated.

Although Lloyd's novels do not entirely reject cultural narratives grounded in hostile attitudes toward the natural world, *TCD 2015* and *2017* question systemic asymmetries and engage with social conflict and antagonism. At first glance, Lloyd's novels seem to reproduce what Hsu and Yazell (2019) have termed “structural appropriation,” the process through which mainstream post-apocalyptic climate fiction projects onto white characters and readers the structural violence of climate catastrophe that has already been experienced by colonised, postcolonial, and Indigenous populations. These future scenarios are often inhabited by small – and sometimes elitist – groups of survivors struggling to regenerate ‘Western’ culture and society, both endangered by a “third-worlding of the West as a result of apocalyptic social collapse” (Hsu and Yazell 350). Cautionary tales about the future third-worlding of the West, they claim, have the aim of “motivating Western readers to avert conditions that are already being lived in the Global South” (355).

Although Hsu and Yazell specifically look at US climate fiction, *TCD 2015* seems to propose a similar third-worlding of the UK. To give a few examples, during the first months of carbon rationing, Laura's neighbor Shiva, unable to let go of his old, consumerist lifestyle (like many of the adult figures of the novel), underscores that the UK is now very different from his initial idea of how a Western society should look like:

Me, I come from Hyderabad – you know it? Famous for cow project, turning manure into gas for the people's homes. So, my family, three generations of cow shit and finally, finally, I get the chance to escape, come to England, God Save the Queen, long-distance lorry firm with my wife's brother. Then working, working like the dog – getting TV, stereo, good German car, kids going McDonald's and drinking Coca-Cola – all one hundred per cent Western style – and then they do this to me. Rationing! Business gone! Hyderabad number two. (*TCD 2015* 100)

In the last pages of the novel, when the Cholera outbreak is confirmed, Laura's neighbor ‘Mousy Woman’ cries “Oh, you've got to be joking. Which world are we living in? The third world now,” whereas Laura defines the situation as “so medieval” (310). Elsewhere in the novel, the Global South is mentioned as a template for disaster and a prototype for what the UK could become as a result of environmental collapse. As Laura mentions in her diary, “London's had less rain [in 2015] than Ethiopia” (117); on the other hand, Europe and the UK are deemed not ready for mass migration caused by severe draughts in North Africa (157). When a category-5 hurricane hits the east coast of the United States, Laura's entries seem to suggest that the collapse of Western civilization is more important than all the environmental changes that have already affected vulnerable populations in the Global South, but also poor, racialized, and Indigenous communities:

“This ain’t no New Orleans, this is rich white people getting killed. Everybody bothered now” (144).

However, what seems to be a rather narrow perspective on the UK, with some hints at ‘rich white’ parts of the US, is turned towards transnational and global concerns in *TCD 2017*. As suggested by Alexa Weik Von Mossner, through text messages and images that Laura frequently receives from her sister, her friend Kieran, and her ex-boyfriend (who respectively live in Indonesia, New York, and Germany), Lloyd turns the attention of the readers towards the larger global impact of climate change, “putting local problems into their larger ecological, economic, and political context” (Von Mossner 2013, 76). The novel explores the link between climate change, displacement, and forced migration in the Global South, as well as an Israeli–Palestinian conflict over water. Whilst it is only in *TCD 2017* that little battles over water turn into an international conflict for the first time in history, Laura had already understood in *TCD 2015* that water was going to be political and it was “rapidly becoming the most serious social issue of this generation” (Lloyd 2008, 157). After some hints provided in the first novel, the analysis of the social and political dimension of climate change then becomes one of the main features of *TCD 2017*, with Laura witnessing the rise of neo-Nazi parties and movements in France and Italy. While in France for a low-budget concert tour, she runs into supporters of the *Front National*, a right-wing party whose mixture of nationalism and xenophobia is fuelled by the consequences of climate change on a global level. As explained by one of these supporters,

there is practically no rain for over a year now for everywhere [...]. Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi, Zambia, Namibia, Ghana, Nigeria, le Corne de l’Afrique, the Sahel, and now also in North. And so the people they come here, or en réalité, they die coming here in the thousands. And now we say we have nothing to spare. No rain in France for 6 weeks. Go home. (Lloyd, *TCD 2017* 191)

The *Front National* and its supporters, he goes on, “stand up for French, for European people. Immigrants are flooding in looking for water, if the Gov won’t stop them then we will we’re gonna kick the shit out of the bougnol!” (*TCD 2017* 204). The attention of the protagonist – and her readers – is therefore turned toward the systemic asymmetries that are brought about and exacerbated by climate change. What in *TCD 2015* seemed to be a “third-worldling of the West,” turns in *TCD 2017* into a trans-national perspective on the “uneven universality” of climate change (Nixon 2011) that does not silence the different forms of vulnerability to environmental catastrophes conceptualised by global climate justice movements. Lloyd’s focus on climate displacement, eco-refugees, and climatic asylum seekers is yet another sign that her novels do not merely portray climate change as a backdrop for human drama, but rather attempt to disentangle the environmental crisis from the post-political sphere where humanity as a whole is under threat. As the ensuing pages of this article will demonstrate, *TCD 2015* and *2017* provide a situated perspective on the uneven universality of climate

change: that of young adults who often struggle against the previous generation to become active agents in a world that is falling apart.

Climate change and intergenerational justice

The question of intergenerational climate justice, to start with, is one of the most discussed aspects of the novel (see for example Farzin 2019). From the very first pages of *TCD 2015*, it is clear that the roles in Laura's family are reversed. Her parents Julia and Nick are in "deep denial" and spend the days leading to the implementation of the carbon rationing lying on the sofa and "staring blindly at the TV like amoebas" while they still can (*TCD 2015* 2). Her mother moreover, is "Being Very Positive" (1), like many of the adult figures of the novel – for example, the "really stupid *positive* woman journalist" who "drops in on people up and down the country to see how they're getting on with their lives" (42, italics mine). Overall, adults act like the current situation is "completely normal" (15) and "do this weird thing where they pretend they're in control, that they've got a plan" (76). Many of them, furthermore, compare the current adverse condition to their previous experiences with war and rationing, in an attempt to provide the younger generation with a bearable perspective. Laura's mother, for instance, stresses that her voluntary work in the 1980s on a kibbutz in Israel has been one of the best moments of her life, whilst Arthur, Laura's elderly neighbour, emphasises that carbon rationing will not last forever, as in the war years:

The thing about rationing I remember most clearly was that everyone did their damndest to carry on as if it were normal. And soon it was. I know it's a dreadfully dull thing to say, but in a way they were very happy times; all pulling together, knowing we were doing something good for the country. And that's how it'll be with this generation. Carbon rationing won't last forever. (*TCD 2015* 266)

Although I agree with Sina Farzin when she suggests that Arthur's framing of rationing as a social leveller that also sparked people's solidarity represents a moment of "hope rooted in the relation between different generations" (Farzin 191),² I claim that adults' positive attitude towards rationing politics can also be interpreted as a sign of the previous generation's inability to cope with and adapt to a climate crisis requiring a radical change in the way people live and consume. In other words, forms of rationing that last forever might be the new normalcy. Conversely, Laura's parents longing for their former consumerist lifestyle indicates that they are not ready to accept systemic change and reduce activities that generate emissions: as Laura indicates, during one of the first months of carbon rationing they decide to go for a drive just because they "needed to do something *fun to cheer [them] up*" (*TCD 2015* 33, italics original). What follows is that Laura is put in the position where she must assume the parental role and look after Julia and Nick's child-like behaviour; throughout both novels, she does not receive or expect guidance from her parents and their generation. The first

heart-to-heart talk between Laura and her mother comes indeed at the very end of *TCB 2017*, when Julia acknowledges that she has never been able to get her message under control:

‘I’m supposed to know what to tell you, but ... well ... I haven’t got a clue.’

I burst out laughing. ‘Mum, that’s the most straight-up thing you’ve ever said to me.’

She sniffed. ‘I’m just so proud of you. I don’t know if I could’ve done this at your age.’ (*TCB 2017* 353)

This passage implies that the responsibility for dealing with the environmental crisis and for shaping society in the twenty-first century rests in the hands of Laura’s generation – as well as in the hands of the implied young adult readers. What I consider to be one of the most important features of these two novels is their attempt to explore the challenges faced by the younger generations when dealing with the contemporary climate challenge: young people, indeed, bear a disproportionate burden of the environmental crises the world faces today and are subject to eco-anxiety, climate anxiety, and other distressing emotions (see Hickman *et al.* 2021). Young people, moreover, are not only disproportionately impacted by climate change, but their agency and visions of the future are often placed under erasure discursively.

Lloyd’s novels, instead, explore what it means for a teenager to go through such a radical change, helping their readers to come to terms with the seeming contradiction between the desire to live a normal teenage life and the moral responsibility of surviving in a damaged world. In the first of the two novels, Laura’s desperate wish for everything to be normal seems to prevail over her coming of age as an eco-citizen, which becomes one of the central features of the sequel set in 2017. Through the perspective of her sister Kim, a “normal, fricked-up, spoiled, twenty-year-old from the West” (*TCB 2015* 127) who gets upset when her gap year to New York is cancelled due to travel restrictions, we understand that at first glance it should not be that challenging for Laura to adjust to the new situation of emergency. “It’s all right for you,” says Kim, “little miss radical, all that anticapitalism bullshit – but what about me? My whole life’s been taken off me” (131). Nevertheless, coexisting with carbon rationing is not as easy as it might seem from Kim’s words: Laura admits indeed that she “care[s] about stuff, but [she] want[s] a life, too” (35), and everything she likes burns so much carbon. Elsewhere in the novel, she argues with her friend Claire, being unable to understand why everything have to be political with her. On her behalf, Laura seems to reject radical climate activism, disclosing that she just wants her life back. Laura’s entries help the readers to understand that the seeming contradiction between some kind of nostalgia for the old pre-rationing life and the responsibility to become an eco-citizen is indeed a common experience for young adults; even though sometimes she feels “dead ashamed” (227) of herself for hating rationing, she is also able to acknowledge that it is okay for a teenager

to miss some of the stuff they used to do (“Y’know – fly abroad, eat KFC, just normal shit” [209]).

TCD 2015 also provides several examples of what it means for a young adult to cope with ecological uncertainty and the social changes brought about by the climate crisis. Her role as a bassist in The Dirty Angels is affected from the very first days of carbon rationing, as band practice means spending carbon points that could be used on food or heating; even bringing a political message into their music (“We’re like total hardcore enviro punk” [137]) does not seem to be enough, as “the country don’t need a message, it needs rain” (190). Even her relationship with her boyfriend Ravi is affected, as the Prime Minister decides to cut off private water and ruins one of their first dates. Laura’s relationship, on the other hand, is not the only one to be affected by carbon rationing: according to her friend Kieran, a single, queer hairdresser, “love, relationships, dating – they need a new form, a new language, a new set of rules” (73), and he therefore starts his own “Carbon Dating” business in an attempt to “make rationing sexy” (170). Laura and her friends, moreover, question whether to have kids in times of global warming: “kids? You want to bring kids into this?” (225). As suggested by Basu, Broad, and Hintz, romance is often an important element of the YA dystopian genre, with adolescent protagonists finding love while they confront the dangers of the future. The authors, however, also claim that romance can often serve to “affirm traditional norms” and “advance the primacy of heterosexual couples” (2013, 8). This is certainly true for *TCD 2015* and *2017*, as Lloyd’s novels do not include queer relationships as a central focus. Nevertheless, I claim that the representation of love in these novels does more than providing appeal and shaping the dystopian narrative, as it is instead one of the key examples provided by the author of what might be lost to the climate crisis from the viewpoint of a young protagonist. Using Laura’s words, “everything is falling to pieces: my home, Ravi – and [...] the band. Rationing has really dicked all over my life” (93), and losing everything that was important in her previous life because of a “bloody greenhouse gas” makes her “dead sad” (237).

The novels make clear that the climate crisis also brings along significant transformations in gender identities and roles, with rationing used by some of the male adult characters as an excuse to “eradicate eighty years of female emancipation” (227). Most fathers, including Laura’s, try to cope with the restrictions of the new era turning into “those crazy American back-wood survivalist” (156); with regard to Laura’s father Nick, after losing his job and being drunk and depressed for several days, he changes into “some macho hunter-gatherer protector of the family” (76). Even the fictional representations of the climate crisis that Laura encounters throughout the novels seem to reproduce this pattern: when, together with her peers, she watches the climate disaster movie *Icebreaker*, everyone in the theatre but them seem to enjoy the scene of a “dad hero guy” (37) saving his family. *Icebreaker*, I suggest, can be read as an example of science fiction cinema that responds to moments of crisis and vulnerability through the old myth of protective manhood and feminine weakness described by Susan Faludi in *The*

Terror Dream (2008). On a similar note, the novels imply that climate change might also have an impact on civil rights. When the category-5 hurricane hits the east coast of the US, the blame is indeed on homosexuals and liberal society, because “if we’d stuck more to the basics,” says Laura’s father, then “things might not have got so out of hand, people would have had their own roles and been satisfied with less” (150). It should be stressed, though, that some of the adult female characters of the novels, including Laura’s mother Julia, respond to such return to conservative roles by creating a feminist collective named “Women Moving Forward,” that will prove to be crucial in moments of environmental disaster and social tension.³

Another important aspect of young adults’ life that is endangered by climate change, finally, is education. In *TCD 2015*, we get several hints that global warming and carbon rationing are changing the face of education, with most students dropping out of Philosophy, Sociology, Art, and so on, in order to pick up more practical stuff. In addition, students start dropping out Travel & Tourism because “what’s the point in studying something you’ll never do?” (40). When education as a whole starts to be deemed useless (“education isn’t everything,” says Laura’s father), Laura understands what it means to be deprived of school and changes her approach to exams. For instance, she uses memory cards with the hope that they might turn her “into a normal teenager who can pass exams” (122). And it is no coincidence that education is linked in both novels to female emancipation and gender roles: when Laura’s father suggests that there are more important things than education, her teacher replies that “it has taken womankind several millennia to escape the constraints of a patriarchal society operated by men, dominating women and oppressing them. Education is freedom” (115). Education remains central in *TCD 2017*, characterised by a darker and more urgent tone but also by a shift of focus from individual identity to collective action. In 2017, Laura attends university in London, and when the Government threatens to cut student’s loans by 50% and to take away their free travel, every single UK school, college and university goes on strike to protest against an idea of education that would only be for the rich.

Reframing uncertain futures through collective youth-led climate action

Laura’s coming-of-age as a proactive eco-citizen, I claim, begins with her engagement with one of those demonstrations. Even though she hates demos, she hates all the people on them, and she hates all the slogans (80), there are several moments in the novels in which she understands that she can no longer stand back and watch. Her gradual – and often unconscious – awakening starts in *TCD 2015*, when she first experiences the violence of the Government in the initial months of carbon rationing, characterised by widespread worries and sporadic protests: “this shit really scares me. Not the protest and stuff, but just the fact that the government got so violent so quickly” (*TCD 2015* 77). She also comes across police brutality

when they charge a group of teenagers or they shoot directly into the crowd with live bullets killing 5 people and then arrest thousands and thousands, lining them up in the square like criminals (195-96). Her awakening continues in *TCD 2017*, when she takes part for the first time in a climate protest and joins the “2” – a green activist group “prepared to use force to get emissions down faster” (*TCD 2017* 67) – during a march against a neofascist movement called the “United Front.” Here, the police hurt 840 protesters and arrest anyone who might have been at the demo. Media reports depicting green activists as demons, however, lead to a public disapproval of ‘disruptive’ climate change protests.

Part of *TCD 2017*, therefore, revolves around the topic of political radicalization. It should be stressed, however, that it is the other people around Laura who give a passionate voice to the global environmental justice movement. For the most part of the novel, indeed, Laura’s participation in the climate movement is marked by a certain amount of scepticism. To give a few examples, when she ends up living in the Docks – a place which is mostly underwater and has become a refuge for a group of radical vegan squatters – and she finds out that her flatmate is part of the climate movement, her entry states “Brilliant. Now I’ve got Che bloody Guevara living in my flat. I’m sick of politics” (67). When she reaches Sicily, where her new boyfriend Adi is volunteering to support African refugees, and she realises there is no going back, she exclaims “Oh God, is that my future? Is this my first step toward being super radical with unshaved armpits, whomping up industrial-sized pans of mung dal in an anarchist squat? Aaaaaaargh!” (232). Her diary entries too become increasingly politicised, and she is therefore afraid that she is going to get old before her time as her diary used to be all about her boyfriend and “shit at school” (265). With the help of her friends, however, she realises that the reason she hates politics is that she believes that, pertaining to a “bunch of grey men” (172) it has nothing to do with her. As soon as she understands that politics has in fact to do with her own life and with the lives of her friends and family, everything changes. As Von Mossner convincingly argues, “by making her heroine a girl who for the longest time insists on staying out of politics [...], Lloyd avoids having her narrator become too didactic and preachy” (80). Overdetermined didacticism, I add, is kept away through a gradual, not unambiguous, and not devoid of contradictions coming-of-age as an eco-citizen of the novels’ protagonist.

Eventually, Laura understands that the decision to reject such radicalisation is a political decision too (Von Mossner 78), and she gets to the point when she can no longer turn a blind eye to all the injustices brought about by climate change. Her awakening moment happens in northern Italy, where she witnesses a conflict over water between poor farmers and a group of Italian soldiers: together with her friends, she “fell in line with the people,” because “there just wasn’t anything else to do” (*TCD 2017* 280). Back in the UK, she decides to join the civil disobedience movement, which is now supported by global strikes in the rest of the world. In the last pages of *TCD 2017*, she joins a new protest force that is

massing in secret under the arches in Waterloo, and, for the first time since the beginning of the carbon rationing, she feels hopeful and alive:

It was like standing on the very, very edge. One step forward for a whole new reality. And then suddenly I felt this surge of excitement, fear, nausea ... and I took the step forward into... what? I don't know and what's more I don't care. It's the strangest feeling. It's like I'm actually young again. (377)

According to Von Mossner, this represents the “most openly utopian moment” (78) in a novel otherwise characterised by a dark tone. The most important feature of this moment, I add, is its collective dimension, which disentangles political participation from that “bunch of grey men” (*TCD 2017* 172). Laura is indeed struck by the courage she witnesses, by “such a refusal to be beaten” (385). She had no previous experience of the power of collective action and writes that she feels “so proud to be out there, to be part of it all” (385). This is not, however, a hopeful ending attached to an otherwise dystopian story. Controversies abound surrounding the necessity to provide hope in YA novels, with some scholars and writers believing that, in order to be attractive and ethical, YA literature must give comfort and reassure its readers by providing at least a glimmer of hope and a promise that a better world would still be possible (Livo 1987; Smith 1998; Hughes 2003; according to Zipes 2003; and Babbit 2006, not only happy endings are more pronounced in YA fiction, but they are among its central features and they are what makes it different from adult fiction). Other scholars and writers, on the contrary, believe that this problematic tension between YA literature’s intention to caution and instruct young readers and its impulse to reassure with a neat and happy ending does a disservice to young readers and undermines the strength and the imaginative coherence of these fictional worlds (Sambell 2003; see also Smith 1998 and Kidd 2013). According to Raffaella Baccolini, however, the genre of YA dystopia embodies this controversy:

YA dystopias, by their very nature, deal with dark times and, much in line with critical dystopias, tend to offer open or not altogether happy 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]. (2019, 117)

We need literature, she goes on, that “challenges and disturbs YA readers” (131) and that is therefore becoming more and more urgent in these troubled times of climate change. The presence of utopian hope at the end of *TCD 2017*, I suggest, does not provide a consoling and comforting happy ending, but helps readers to come to terms with an imperfect world.⁴ This resonates with Marco Caracciolo’s work (2022) on contemporary fiction and unstable futures, where he proposes a shift from a negative understanding of uncertainty, in which uncertainty is deemed to fuel indifference and fatalism about the future, to a more complex

form of understanding of our times that can foster critical thinking. Similarly, Rebecca Solnit has recently argued that what can motivate us to act is a “sense of possibility within uncertainty – that the outcome is not yet fully determined and our actions may [still] matter in shaping it” (2022, online).⁵ Even though this embrace of uncertainty seems to be tied to the more and more misused buzzword resilience, Caracciolo makes it clear that his notion of embracing uncertainty is a necessarily collective gesture, whereas the discourse of resilience, grounded in a neoliberal mindset, seems to favour individual action.

And it is no coincidence that the focus of the last pages of *TCD 2017* is on the collective dimension of youth-led climate action. After joining the civil disobedience movement, however, Laura understands that she must find her own way of dealing with the climate crisis, and, on December 28th, she writes in her diary “the *angels* is gonna be my way” (397, italics original); in other words, her strategy for raising other people’s awareness implies using something that was deemed as not useful and therefore not necessary from the first days of carbon rationing (“the country needs rain, not a message from a teenage band,” she wrote in her diary in *TCD 2015*). After the march, indeed, their song “Deny It” goes viral and reaches number one of top download charts for the UK. Every protestor who attended the march is now singing their tune, that puts the new generation at the forefront of the climate revolution: “If this is the standard then I defy it / If this is the price then I don’t buy it / If this is advancement then I deny it!” (399). The last entry of *TCD 2017*, on December 31st, says it all:

Me, my family, my friends, the angels, the message, the fight. No bombs, no guns, no escape. All I want is a straight-up fight with all the crooked, thieving, lying, two-faced, cheating bastards. That’s the only thing that matters to me any more. *Revolution!* (400, italics mine)

By using “revolution” as the concluding word of the novels, Lloyd refuses once more to reassure her readers with a neat and happy ending. Laura’s last entry seems to suggest that a disruptive collective action might be necessary to make the voices of young climate activists heard, and this is especially important in times when we are witnessing a growing effort to intimidate and criminalise youth-led global climate movements that are trying to bring attention to the real crime of climate inaction perpetrated by governments around the world.⁶ Radicalisation, in other words, is a direct consequence of climate inaction; more importantly, it might create new possibilities for utopian hope. As climate justice activist Greta Thunberg said in Milan at Pre-COP26, the Youth4Climate conference, “We can no longer let the people in power decide what hope is. Hope is not passive. Hope is not blah blah blah. Hope is telling the truth. Hope is taking action. And hope always comes from the people” (2021).⁷

It has been highlighted by Von Mossner, moreover, that “the nature of the problem precludes a neat and happy ending” (78). The uncertainty that prevails at the end of *TCD 2017*, add Miller, Hutton, and Braithwaite, can be interpreted

as a method to position readers to consider “what their path might be” (69), just as Laura’s coming-of-age as an ecocitizen implies that she must find her own way to strike a compromise between her desire for a normal teenage life and her desire for a better world. Becoming an ecocitizen, in other words, also means understanding that climate change is a problem with no single solution.⁸

Notes

1. Sherilyn MacGregor posits that these narratives of “natural disasters, chronic resource shortages, global pandemics and perpetual war” are “not merely the stuff of science fiction” (2014: 621) but they are employed in UN conferences and grassroots organisations: one could look at “Please Help the World,” the film chosen for the opening ceremony of the United Nations Climate Change Conference 2009 (COP15) in Copenhagen, depicting a fictional Scandinavian girl having a nightmare about an Earth wrecked by climate change. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NVGgncVq-4> (accessed: January 10, 2023).
2. According to Farzin, “the inter-generational struggle around questions of accountability and responsibility displayed in the novel is not simply a blame game but is also a resource of hope and coping” (2019, 189).
3. Due to this important focus on the impact of climate change on gender roles and identities, Lloyd’s novels seem to respond to the problem of gender and sexuality in post-apocalyptic narratives of climate change that has been highlighted, among other, by Greta Gaard (2017) and Susan Watkins (2020). According to Gaard, the “feminist fiction about climate change has yet to be written” (2017: 144-45): several texts that are considered to be part of the growing canon of climate change fiction are indeed male-authored and “non-feminist at best” and “anti-feminist and sexist at worse” (145). Quite differently, she adds, YA climate fiction offers several examples of narratives that can inspire environmental activism while empowering teenagers to speak up for justice through the representation of female survivalist characters. Laura is indeed the “rebellious girl protagonist” outlined by Day, Green-Barteet, and Montz in their *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction* (2014): an active agent that attempts to recreate the world in which she lives while also redefining what it means to be a young woman in times of crisis. In several moments of both novels, indeed, Laura writes in her diary that she feels like “a girl in a movie” (Lloyd 2010, 59 and 254).
4. Climate change, writes Lisa Garforth, “makes utopia so difficult. A messy, intractable, open-ended problem which involves the likelihood of real environmental and human damage and loss that are already collapsing into the present does not lend itself to visions of better futures” (2018, 125). And yet, this is precisely why climate change needs utopia, and, particularly, a “processual and open-ended kind of utopianism” (125).
5. On a similar note, Solnit introduced in 2004 the concept of “hope in the dark,” an invitation to embrace the unknowability and unpredictability of the world. *Hope in the Dark* was written against the despair caused by the Bush administration and the onset of the war in Iraq. Even though that moment passed a long time ago, despair and defeatism have continued to characterise the 21st century, due to economic inequality, the attack on civil liberties, and the arrival of climate change, which is faster and harder than anticipated (Solnit 2016). The hope she describes does not deny all these realities but rather faces them by remembering that the 21st century has also been, so far, a remarkable moment for “movement-building, social change and deep shifts in ideas, perspective and frameworks for large parts of the population” (2016, online). Hope, she goes on, locates itself in the embrace of uncertainty: when you recognise it, you also recognise that there

might be room to act and therefore influence the outcomes of such unknowability – alone or as part of a community. The concept of hope in the dark has been subsequently reinterpreted within the Anthropocene framework, as an invitation to “stay with the trouble” (Haraway 2016) of ecological devastation, to coexist with indeterminacy and vulnerability – the very conditions of our time – (Tsing 2015), and to “dance with disaster” that is to say, “to develop modes of personal and collective comportment that are no longer premised on certitude – the confidence of possessing a sure guiding star – but that instead presuppose the unforeseeable. A largely improvisational dance” (Rigby 2015, 30).

6. On January 2, 2023, for instance, young members from “Last Generation” group sprayed the front of the upper house of the Italian parliament in Rome with washable orange paint. Following the protest, the group was highly criticized for being “vandals.” The video footage of the protest, moreover, has been censored by TG1 (the first channel of Italy’s public broadcaster, RAI), to stress that these kinds of protests are not acceptable. See video footage shared by “Last Generation” on Twitter here: <https://twitter.com/UltimaGenerazi1/status/1609892433122451458?s=20&t=A5tOasvukua8Wy7dpVXeqw> (accessed January 10, 2023).
7. See https://twitter.com/GretaThunberg/status/1442860615941468161?s=20&t=-Xmirdz4rsH2dsgK7_gojA (accessed January 10, 2023).
8. As American science fiction author Octavia Butler wrote in *A Few Rules for Predicting the Future*: “‘OK,’ the young man challenged. ‘So what’s the answer?’ ‘There isn’t one,’ I told him. ‘No answer? You mean we’re just doomed?’ He smiled as though he thought this might be a joke. ‘No,’ I said. ‘I mean there’s no single answer that will solve all of our future problems. There’s no magic bullet. Instead there are thousands of answers – at least. You can be one of them if you choose to be.’ (2000, online).

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