

SEM5. U/Dys/Eco-topias: Hope and despair in Anthropocenic literature

13 September h. 8:30-11:00, PN 11

Convenors

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Abstract

Since Moore's *Utopia* (1516), ideal nowhere lands envisioning a "redeemed future" (Garrard, 2004: 37) have often morphed into dystopian stories that "frighten and warn, [engaging] with pressing global concerns" (Basu, Broad, & Hintz, 2013: 1). From Wells and Perkins to Dick and Atwood, from *The Matrix* and *Avatar* to *Wall-e*, imaginary futuristic scenarios increasingly address climate change, environmental disaster, and humanity's destiny.

In today's Anthropocene era, eco-anxiety dominates, with young adult dystopias like *Uglies*, *The Hunger Games*, and *Divergent* becoming blockbuster films, and post-apocalyptic tales like McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) earning literary prizes and worldwide acclaim. Recent studies, however, question dystopic narratives' effects. Rather than alerting readers to urgent environmental needs, the doom-and-gloom rhetoric (Arnold, 2018), by undermining people's *locus of control* (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002), often triggers flight, fight, or freeze responses (Wakeman in Young, 2022), generating inactivity, escapism, or aggression. Ecotopias and solarpunk fiction, instead, inspire positive emotions like hope and desire. These narratives portray "future worlds that [are] not depressing but instead so enticing that they might lead us to yearn for a new way of being" (Weik von Mossner, 2017, 163), encouraging activism and change.

This seminar invites contributions on classic or recent works read through the lens of Climate Change and the Anthropocene, Petrocultures and Energy Humanities, Posthumanism, and Ecocriticism. Moreover, we are interested in papers that apply affect studies to explore how these imaginary worlds influence readers' reactions and behaviour.

Possible topics include but are not limited to:

- U/Dys/Eco-topias and Ecoanxiety and Solastalgia
- U/Dys/Eco-topias, Affect Studies and Empirical Ecocriticism
- U/Dys/Eco-topias, Petrocultures and Energy Humanities
- Cyberpunk, Solarpunk, & co.
- Eco-Apocalypses and Cli-fi
- U/Dys/Eco-topias, Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, and the Environmental Humanities
- U/Dys/Eco-topias, Posthumanism and New Materialism
- U/Dys/Eco-topias rhetoric, stylistics, and discourses
- U/Dys/Eco-topias and children's literature, picturebooks, games, and films.

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SEM5. Papers

13 September h. 8:30-11:00, PN 11

- *The second creation. Intermediality and ecocritical discourse in Under Milk Wood* (Davide Crosara, Sapienza Università di Roma)
- *"Focused anger" and "radical hope" in young adult climate fiction: an affective reading of Lauren James's Green Rising* (Chiara Xausa, Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna)

- *Narrating resistance: YA dystopias and the ecological imagination* (Carolina Celeste Granini, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia)
- *Expecting the end: Affective turns and green utopianism in The Future* (Asia Battiloro, Sapienza Università di Roma / University of Silesia in Katowice)

SEM5. Abstracts

Expecting the end: Affective turns and green utopianism in *The Future*

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Abstract

Since the early 2000s, the Anthropocene has come to signify not just a geological epoch but also a culturally resonant paradigm shaped by awareness of human-driven ecological disruption (Keller, 2017). In this context, eco-narratives have become key forms of cultural expression. From the perspective of audience-reception studies, they serve analytical and didactic functions by reframing scientific knowledge through affective strategies, thereby shaping readers' psychological, cultural, and ecopolitical responses (Benedetti, 2021; Schneider-Mayerson, 2018; Schneider-Mayerson et al., 2023). Reflecting this concern with affect, Lisa Garforth (2018) identifies "green utopianism" as a key mode through which contemporary Western literature imagines ecological futures that resist dystopian closure and offer readers a renewed sense of hope.

Combining a reader-oriented approach with insights from Garforth's (2018) study, I argue that Naomi Alderman's *The Future* (2023) exemplifies a post-millennial articulation of green utopianism. Set in a near-future United States shaped by climate crisis, inequality, and billionaire-controlled AI systems, the novel links environmental collapse to religious apocalypticism. The apocalyptic tone, sustained by the CEOs—central characters who believe in an AI-predicted global catastrophe—is further intensified through biblical references which are repurposed in digital survivalist forums as both ecological prophecy and moral rationale. Drawing on Garforth (2018), I argue that *The Future* reimagines apocalypticism not as a culmination, but as a generative space for transformation. In fact, Garforth (2018, 23, 109) contends that twenty-first-century green utopias harness emotions such as fear, nostalgia, and mourning to give rise to eco-utopian possibilities. Consistent with this view of apocalypse-induced utopianism, Alderman's novel engages deeply with apocalyptic tropes and elite fantasies of survival, only to ultimately subvert them. The anticipated collapse is revealed to be a fabrication, and the CEOs' exile unexpectedly facilitates the conversion of harmful tech systems into tools for ecological restoration. By resisting dystopian closure, the narrative redirects its emotional intensity toward imaginative agency and empowerment.

The Future's affective trajectory aligns with what Alexa Weik von Mossner identifies as a central challenge for environmental narratives: the need to balance hope and despair. Overly bleak representations, she argues, risk alienating readers or inducing emotional paralysis rather than encouraging action (2017, 98). Alderman's novel responds to this challenge by drawing readers into emotional proximity with crisis, then reorienting that affective investment toward utopian transformation. In doing so, it reframes the future not as a fixed endpoint, but as a site of open-ended possibility.

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The second creation. Intermediality and ecocritical discourse in *Under Milk Wood*

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The long and troubled genetic history of *Under Milk Wood* (1953) testifies Dylan Thomas' complex reaction to postwar anxieties. Scenes overtly charged with references to repression and confinement were expunged from the last draft of the "play for voices". The influence of coeval radio broadcasts which aired characters roaming through bombed cities (*Return Journey* being probably the most relevant example of this stance) was lessened to the point that the last works of Thomas were accused of regressive, nostalgic escapism. The aim of this paper is to reframe *Under Milk Wood* as a work wittingly enacting a second creation after the catastrophic annihilation of the Second World War. The *Piece for Radio* tests the boundaries of genre, delineating an intermedial perspective where poetry, theatre, radio and cinema converge and collide. It simultaneously voices a new language and a new sense of place: the village of Llareggub is a postwar utopia where the lexicon of war economy metamorphoses into a secular breath of the Spirit: "a breeze from the creased water sighs the streets" (Thomas, 2000, 62). The dead and the living share a new notion of creaturality: far from being docile and reified beings, they voice and embody a second creation where a posthuman version of the pastoral emerges.

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Narrating resistance: YA dystopias and the ecological imagination

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Young Adult and Children's Literature serve as critical sites for negotiating identity, ethical agency and imaginative responses to crisis. In the context of the Anthropocene, climate fiction aimed at younger audiences emerges not merely as cautionary narrative but as a pedagogical tool that cultivates ecological awareness and resilience. This paper examines how three contemporary YA novels, Saci Lloyd's *The Carbon Diaries 2015* (2008), Laura Lam's *Goldilocks* (2020) and Lauren James's *Green Rising* (2021), use near-future scenarios to engage with the climate crisis through emotionally resonant, youth-centered narratives. While adult climate fiction leans heavily on apocalyptic pessimism, these texts combine rebellion, realism and a necessary "glimmer of hope" (Hintz, 2003).

Lloyd's *The Carbon Diaries 2015* is the most realistic representation of a future Britain under stringent carbon rationing. The story is narrated through the diary of sixteen-year-old Laura. As climate regulation reshapes daily life, from energy use to food access, the novel explores the tensions of living sustainably and foregrounds personal growth and collective adaptation. *Goldilocks* envisions a climate-ravaged Earth governed by patriarchal authoritarianism, prompting five women to steal a spacecraft and flee toward a habitable exoplanet. Blending feminist ecofuturism with themes of reproductive politics, survival ethics and personal betrayal, the novel dramatizes how ecological breakdown intersects with maternal bonds, resistance and agency. In *Green Rising*, teenagers around the globe develop "Greenfingers" supernatural abilities to grow plants from their skin. As their powers are craved by corporate interests, protagonists must navigate environmental ethics, class politics and the burden of activism. Through its multimedia narrative and the use of tweets, podcasts and forum posts, the novel becomes a dynamic allegory for contemporary climate resistance.

Grounded in Ecocriticism and Children's Literature Studies, the paper argues that these narratives reimagine ecological storytelling not as paralyzing doom, but as affectively rich and pedagogically empowering. By foregrounding resilience, interconnectedness and the power of adaptability, these texts also offer what Weik von Mossner (2017) terms "affective ecologies": emotional landscapes that foster desire for transformation rather than retreat. They invite young readers to see themselves as agents of change, to critically think about contemporary issues with narrative resources to imagine and enact better futures. By re-coding dystopia with ecotopian sensibilities, *the three YA dystopias* exemplify a literary movement that shifts climate discourse from fatalism to hope for the future, helping a generation not just inherit crisis but learn to re-story it.

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“Focused anger” and “radical hope” in young adult climate fiction: An affective reading of Lauren James’s *Green Rising*

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According to a global survey published in *Lancet Planetary Health* in 2021, nearly 60% of young people (aged 16-25) are very or extremely worried about the future of the planet (Hickman et al.). These feelings of helplessness are amplified by a sense of intergenerational injustice that makes many young people feel abandoned. At the same time, climate change is often framed as a tale of and for the children (Rogers), with climate change legacy bestowed upon future generations. Investigating the role of YA climate fiction in helping young readers to cope with the negative emotions emerging in the Anthropocene, and to turn climate anxiety into ecological citizenship, is of the utmost importance. The potential of literature to promote hope for humankind in the post-Anthropocene is the subject of intensive research that stresses the central role of young generations in addressing anthropogenic changes in Earth's ecosystems (Oziewicz, 2022). With regard to YA literature, Alexa Weik von Mossner (2017) argues that reading a literary text is a form of mental simulation that engages readers' bodies in a way similar to their interaction with the real world. This chapter proposes a reading of Lauren James' *Green Rising* (2021), a recent YA climate fiction novel revolving around a group of teenagers displaying a supernatural ability to grow plants from their skin. The analysis will use YA literary criticism, affective ecocriticism, and critical dystopian/utopian studies to suggest that the entanglement of negative and positive emotions in the novel might help readers to go beyond the dichotomy of hope and despair.

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