

# Ploughing the Field:

## YA Literature and Justice in the Anthropocene

Emily Corbett and Leah Phillips

In an age of climate collapse, systemic inequality, war, and mass displacement, the narratives through which we make sense of the world matter more than ever. As Hubert Zapf argues, “literature is a form of cultural knowledge which stages, in the medium of language and discourse itself, complex dynamical processes of life on the boundary of the culture-nature interaction” (865). YA fiction, in particular, can serve as a charged site where dominant ideologies are both reinforced and challenged, offering young people ways of recognising their social realities while imagining alternative futures. Through the experiences of protagonists navigating worlds that are metaphorically and literally burning, YA illuminates how narrative itself can become a tool for negotiating power and agency under conditions of ecological precarity.

The climate crisis is not a distant backdrop in YA; it is a force that exposes and intensifies existing social inequalities. For example, Michelle Deininger notes that many YA texts depict “the way the most disadvantaged and vulnerable are impacted by that crisis—whether that means rising water levels, changing weather patterns, drought, famine, or

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uninhabitable land” (456). These narratives often position young adults within systems that constrain their autonomy even as they search for strategies of survival, solidarity, and change. Many texts share, as Alice Curry observes, “a major preoccupation [...] with the protagonists’ potential for subjectivity and agency within largely disempowering social systems and the hopeful association of much young adult fiction with individual empowerment through negotiation of the protagonists’ interrelationships with the outside world” (5). These tendencies bring into focus the tension between individual and collective modes of resistance, and the kinds of political possibilities YA literature makes available to young readers. As Curry, along with scholars including Sarah Falcus and Katsura Sako remind us, individual action alone cannot redress the scale of the ecological crisis. Yet YA literature and YA studies together illuminate how intergenerational and collective forms of resistance might emerge from individual acts of resistance.

Scholarship on YA literature’s engagement with environmental and social justice has expanded considerably in recent years, reflecting a broader turn toward interdisciplinary and intersectional frameworks in examinations of youth literature. Since the publication of Kenneth B. Kidd and Sidney I. Dobrin’s *Wild Things: Children’s Culture and Ecocriticism* (2004) – the first book-length study of its kind – the field has expanded to include a range of monographs and edited collections exploring children’s literature through environmental and ecocritical lenses (see, for example: Heneghan; Goga et al.; Jaques). Within YA studies specifically, works such as Curry’s *Environmental Crisis in Young Adult Fiction: A Poetics of Earth* (2013) and Marek Oziewicz’s *Justice in Young Adult Speculative Fiction: A Cognitive Reading* (2015) laid important groundwork for theorising how YA narratives imagine ecological consciousness and ethical responsibility across human and more-than-human relations. Most recently, scholars have extended this work through new ecocritical approaches that foreground botanical perspectives (Duckworth and Guanio-Uluru; Duckworth and Herb), as well as mythic and speculative dimensions of environmental storytelling (Oziewicz et al.).

In this iteration of “Ploughing the Field”, we brought together scholars and educators (see Table 1) to examine further how YA literature articulates, mediates, and examines notions of social and environmental justice.<sup>1</sup> Our purpose was to understand: how environmental and social justice and injustice are conceptualised and entangled; the mobilisation of place in narratives of justice, belonging, and displacement; the tension between individual empowerment and collective political action; and the potential of YA literature to approach justice not only as a theme, but as a method, practice, and relational ethic.

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<sup>1</sup> Five contributors were invited to attend one of two roundtable discussions hosted by Corbett and Phillips on Microsoft Teams in July and August 2025. We collected approximately 135 minutes (20,900 words) of dialogue and therefore offer an edited précis of responses in a combined account of these separate conversations that does not reflect the order in which contributors put forward their ideas.

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**Table 1**

| Name           | Role                                                                                                                                                                               |
|----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Annika Herb    | Education Development Lead at the University of Newcastle, Australia.                                                                                                              |
| Jesus Montaña  | Assistant Professor of Literature at Baylor University, Texas, United States.                                                                                                      |
| Lara Saguisag  | Associate Professor and Georgiou Chair in Children's Literature and Literacy at New York University, United States.                                                                |
| Marek Oziewicz | Sidney and Marguerite Henry Professor of Children's and Young Adult Literature at the University of Minnesota, United States.                                                      |
| Sara Shahwan   | Associate Lecturer in Children's Literature at Goldsmiths, University of London, United Kingdom; Assistant Lecturer at the Faculty of Women for Arts, Ain Shams University, Egypt. |

**QUESTION ONE**

What do you understand by “social and environmental justice” in the context of YA, and are they separable or necessarily entangled?

**Lara Saguisag:** I want to begin with how I understand the terms more broadly, which underpins my perception of how they operate in the context of YA literature. For me, the term environmental justice itself is really a reminder that our efforts to protect biodiversity, to keep water, air, and land clean, and to reduce our environmental impacts, must be in tandem with human rights. I think it is a term that reminds us that environmental work must be anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist. A commitment to the environment must be informed by and work toward economic justice, labour justice, gender justice, disability justice, and racial justice. Environmental justice movements emerge in response to white environmentalisms or mainstream environmentalisms that prioritise white, middle-class, and global-north needs and perspectives. They're calling attention to the fact that the communities that are impacted most by contaminants, pollutants, and climate change are often the people who have the least political and economic power. Environmental justice works to include and address social justice issues that mainstream environmentalisms tend to sideline.

**Jesus Montaña:** I think they're entangled, namely because colonialism is a three-pronged effort against people, environment, and knowledge. As colonisation entangles all three of these together, they're also necessarily entangled in efforts to decolonise. If you only focus on the environment, you are overlooking the people who have endured harm. All too often, I think that has been done strategically to privilege a certain group – the upper middle class, white, global-north citizens. If you are going to meaningfully talk about a global effort to promote environmental justice, all three prongs must continue to be entangled. We should

also add one more thing to the conversation about justice: food justice. That's one of the most practical elements for me, on a personal level and at this moment. I live in Texas, and it's ironic because this is an extremely fertile area – and yet there's so much food insecurity. Food injustice is now one of the civilisational challenges we face, alongside many others.

**Marek Oziewicz:** Jesus' example of food injustice in Texas points at where we are today in our historical moment. If you look back a hundred years, most people in Texas grew their own food. Most food was nutritious and healthy. Most water was unpolluted. In terms of food justice, we've seen a significant degradation from where we were. The same, sadly, is the case with social justice and environmental justice, both of which are historically situated. In 2015, I published a book about the evolution of our notions of justice, called *Justice in Young Adult Speculative Fiction: A Cognitive Reading*. Since then, I've had 10 years to develop these insights and I'm even more confident of how important it is to consider ideas about justice as cultural artifacts that evolve in contexts. The concept of social justice emerged in the second part of the 19th century in the context of labour movements in Europe. In 1848, the first treatise naming social justice as the goal for organizing a civil society was written, and it was a reaction to the abuse of ordinary people by industrialists and capitalism. This call mentioned nothing about gender, colonialism, and other forms of exploitation. It was just workers versus the employers. The understanding of social justice then evolved and expanded, especially in the United States with the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. The 1990s saw the third expansion to include other minorities. The notion of environmental justice emerged in the 1970s and has continued to expand ever since. Justice is such a positive, powerful word. If you add 'justice' to anything, everyone is for it. All too often, however, people evoke justice for its emotional valence, without being aware of what exactly it is that they talk about. Many new concepts emerged only over the past 20 years. I agree that social and environmental justice are entangled, but I also recognise that they often mean different things to different audiences and in different contexts.

**Annika Herb:** Social and environmental justice must be entangled. I don't believe they can exist in isolation, either in young adult literature or beyond it. To fight for social justice is to fight for environmental justice and vice versa; to a degree, we cannot fight for one without the other. We know that issues like climate change have tangible social impacts as well as environmental ones – for instance, the existence of climate refugees provides a good example. YA literature, in general, is built upon the idea of justice in whatever form that may take; the rebellion against those in power that is typical in YA – whether it be against parents, institutions, dystopian governments, and others – is also a rehearsal for recognising wider structures of injustice. I think we can see the influence of these justice narratives through the rise in adolescent activists. In an Australian context, for example, there are the protests that (often) young people, have staged around climate change and the devastation of the Black Summer Fires. Young adults are fighting to see change in the world. YA fiction captures the frustration, urgency, and hope of young readers and characters alike, showing that environmental and social justice cannot be separated. YA shows how their liminal status as

adolescents is both empowering and disempowering, giving them the sense that they can and must make action to bring about change, but also reminding them how constrained they are by adult systems. That tension, though, is exactly what fuels both the stories and the activism: it is the refusal to simply accept things as they are, and the insistence on imagining how they might be otherwise.

**Jesus Montaña:** YA is serving as a proving ground for some of these larger discussions and negotiations of what ‘justice’ means, bringing together all these different areas like society, environment, colonialism, capitalism, and more. I think that a lot of this work, especially in Black, Latinx, and Indigenous fiction, really comes out of the US Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and 70s. But, at that time, it wouldn’t necessarily have been thought of as an environmental issue – only a social issue – even though these books were dealing with, for example, uranium mining. Over the years, YA has offered a space where these changing philosophies and ideas have been captured and explored.

**Sara Shahwan:** Right now, it feels urgent to rethink what we mean by environmental justice. There’s a growing recognition that environmentalism has largely been a white movement, and the same applies to ecocriticism as the study of literature and the environment. Cheryll Glotfelty, in her Introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*, admits this and highlights the need to include more diverse voices and make connections with social justice. One voice that helps me reconceptualise environmental justice is that of the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish in “Think of Others” (in *Almond Blossoms and Beyond*). This is a poem was originally written for adults and later illustrated for young readers by Sahar Abdallah. Take for example its opening lines: “As you prepare your breakfast, think of others / (do not forget the pigeon’s food).” Justice here begins with thinking about others. It asks us to go beyond the self and extend care to the Other, human and nonhuman. The whole poem can be read as a manifesto for environmental justice, inseparable from Darwish’s lifelong struggle against the colonisation of the land and displacement of its people – “As you return home, to your home, think of others / (do not forget the people of the camps).” It is again about this entanglement between our plight and the plight of others. I recently came across a concept coined by Palestinian climate activist and researcher Manal Shqair that I believe is significant in this discussion: “eco-sumud”. The Arabic word صمود (*sumud*) means steadfastness, and Shqair’s term refers to everyday anti-colonial practices through which the Palestinian people resist the colonial disruption of their relationship with the land while reclaiming their right to freedom. Such acts of “eco-sumud” provide a pathway to social and environmental justice that we can trace in YA literature by writers from the Global South.

**Lara Saguisag:** I have become aware recently that when some people use the term ‘environmental justice’, it is to highlight human relationships with the more-than-human. So the term also encourages us to reflect on what it means to develop an ethical relationship with those we historically have seen only as resources. It prompts us to consider whether our encounters with the more-than-human largely serve our human needs. In the context of YA, I

see this entanglement between social and environmental justice most powerfully explored in literature by Indigenous, Latinx, and Black authors because I think they explicitly tie issues of racial justice, anti-colonialism, and decolonisation with care for the environment.

**Marek Oziewicz:** The concept of environmental justice includes two foci. The narrower, anthropocentric focus promotes the idea that every human being has the right to a clean environment: this idea has been around since the 1970s but was only recognized in 2022 through a resolution by the UN Human Rights Council. This focus has historically centered the white, middle-class, and global-north population, but it is now particularly oriented at the rights of underserved communities. The broader, ecocentric focus of environmental justice recognizes that all living beings have a right to a clean environment; not just humans, but animals, plants, and ecosystems too. Understandings of environmental justice are shifting towards this expansive, ecocentric perspective, acknowledging that non-human entities like rivers, plants, mountains, and biomes have rights too. Bringing about this change in direction is hard but I also think it's unstoppable. As others have mentioned, a lot of this work is being led by Indigenous authors and authors of color – authors from communities that know first-hand the environmental and climate devastation being experienced by their human and non-human communities.

**Sara Shahwan:** I once came across an argument that environmental justice might be separate from social justice. The claim was that environmental justice could serve as a unifying cause that everyone should be able to rally around regardless of differences. According to this view, group prides or attachments create divisions that distract people from the shared goal of addressing climate change. But this argument can be easily challenged from multiple perspectives as injustices do not exist in isolation – and the less advantaged (due to race, class, gender, etc.) are usually the most affected by ecological disasters. Greta Thunberg provides a powerful counterargument in one of her interviews:

If we pretend to care about the environment, if we pretend to care about the climate and our children's future, without seeing and acknowledging and fighting against the suffering of all marginalized people today, then that is an extremely racist approach to justice that excludes the majority of the world's population. (31:50-32:16)

Thunberg's phrase "a racist approach to justice" is compelling, as the paradox makes you stop and question your attitude. A racist approach to environmental justice embeds a hierarchy of suffering that values some lives over others, often disguised by greenwashing discourse. It is inspiring to see youth activists insist on the inseparability of social and environmental justice. Thunberg, for instance, has been central to climate-change activism and protests, and she has staunchly spoken out against the genocide and starvation in Gaza. We have witnessed ecocide and genocide inflicted simultaneously; we cannot talk about one without the other. When we look at the root causes of our crises today, it becomes clear how deeply entangled the Western

systems of colonialism and capitalism have been in shaping global injustices. Environmental destruction has long been used as a weapon to exploit and control the Other.

## QUESTION TWO

How does YA literature mobilise place – urban, rural, and borderland landscapes – to explore questions of justice, belonging, and displacement?

**Lara Saguisag:** When I thought about this question, the first books that came to mind were *Orleans* (2013) by Sherri L. Smith and, to some extent, Paolo Bacigalupi's *Ship Breaker* (2010). Both novels depict how the climate crisis displaces people, but I want to focus on *Orleans* in particular. The novel is literally about the creation of a new border: after catastrophic flooding and the outbreak of disease, the Gulf Coast is walled off from the rest of the United States. That premise taps into anxieties about national and political borders, and it really highlights how artificial those borders are – how easily states can construct and reconstruct them to consolidate and maintain power. *Orleans*, referencing the horrific aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, shows how governments and institutions easily abandon and discard people, pushing particular communities beyond borders because they're not seen as part of the national 'us'. But what I find especially interesting in *Orleans* is the way the borderland itself becomes a space where people respond differently to disaster. For some, survival means deceit and hoarding resources. But the novel also imagines how people form communities, adapt to hostile environments, and learn to care for others, especially for the most vulnerable. I'm really interested in YA books that imagine how humans might respond to shifting borders, that show how these landscapes marked by crises are spaces where justice, belonging, and community are not necessarily forgotten. I often imagine myself in such apocalyptic scenarios, and sad to say, I'm realizing that if the zombie apocalypse came, I'd probably be a terrible person. I'd be incredibly selfish. So it's actually useful for me to read YA books that offer alternative models, that picture how communities might turn toward care and collectivism rather than selfishness.

**Jesus Montaña:** I work in the US/Mexico Borderlands, so that's the lens I naturally gravitate toward. And I think this is an easy place to see how nations literally cut off cultures. Gloria Anzaldúa basically says: there's a thriving community here, on both sides of the border. These communities share history, language, and culture. Then you build a border, you put up a wall, and you tear them apart. In this, the border creates an open wound, "una herida abierta" (25), as Anzaldúa terms it, in which a community that was once whole has been split apart. What's particularly interesting to me is how the environment comes into play, because the border is fundamentally unnatural. I use that word deliberately. It goes against natural systems, like the mobility and migration of animals. It cuts off creatures from their natural migratory patterns. In YA literature, this often comes through in compelling ways. You see animals and ecosystems divided by the border wall. The wall isn't just a human political project; it has huge

environmental impacts. You can use these texts to teach social and environmental justice by asking: what's happening to animals here? How is the border disrupting butterflies' migration patterns, or bats' flight paths? And that's just for animals that can fly. What about those that can't? I'm exposing myself here, but I love cryptids. Chupacabras – this little regional cryptid – are apparently migratory too! The border wall disrupts their movement as well. And when their habitats are damaged, they have to relocate elsewhere, just like other species. It's a fascinating way to think about how borders impact both human and non-human communities.

**Marek Oziewicz:** Another book that comes to mind is *The Chupacabras of the Río Grande* (2019) by Adam Gidwitz and David Bowles. The central conflict is the border itself. The chupacabras are portrayed as an endangered species vital to the local ecosystem, including the human cultural ecosystem. The plot is not just about one species or the biological biome, but also about culture, community, and the relationships between them. Many other titles are set in specific, real places and written in the context of actual climate disasters. For example, *Paradise on Fire* (2021) by Jewell Parker Rhodes is based on the wildfire that destroyed Paradise, California. Terry Pratchett's *Nation* (2008) is fantasy, but it was written in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. *Hurricane Child* (2018) by Kacen Callender and a number of other books emerged after Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. These novels address the environmental and climatic impacts on particular places, even if they use fictional characters and plots to do so. Another group of narratives – picture books, novels, chapter books – are not set in any single place but evoke broader regions. For example, Darcie Little Badger's *Elatsoe* (2020) and *Sheine Lende* (2024) draws on the American Southwest – especially Texas, but it extends into Arizona and beyond. Nick Fuller Googins' *The Great Transition* (2023) is set between Nuuk, Greenland, and the (future) flooded East Coast, even as it offers flashbacks to specific flood, wildfire and tornado events across the US. Katherine Rundell's *Impossible Creatures* (2023) is set in Scotland, but Scotland functions as a portal to another world. By contrast, Oliver Jeffers' *Begin Again* (2023) chooses the planet Earth as a specific location to highlight its message about the collective choice present-day humanity must make. In all these cases, a wider geographic or cultural landscape becomes central to the story.

**Annika Herb:** I think that sense of embeddedness and the power of local landscapes is also crucial when we look at urban and suburban settings, particularly in relation to questions of identity and belonging. One book that comes to mind for me is *Does My Head Look Big in This?* (2005) by the Australian author Randa Abdel-Fattah. It's one of the first YA novels that made me think deeply about social justice, particularly Islamophobia as a young reader. The story focuses on a younger YA audience and centres empowered young Muslim characters who articulate their faith and beliefs with nuance and strength. As the story unfolds, we see them confronting Islamophobia in ways that are painful, frustrating, and real. What's especially powerful is how the novel is situated so firmly within an Australian urban and suburban landscape, grounding these questions of identity, belonging, and justice in a specific cultural context. The setting – school, neighbourhoods, public spaces – becomes a site where

Islamophobia is enacted and resisted. It's very much an Australian story, but it has wider implications for understanding how YA literature explores social justice and cultural belonging in the context of localized places and communities.

**Marek Oziewicz:** Attachment to place – home, in particular – is a very important aspect of many plots indeed. The question of what counts as home often drives the narratives and allows authors to position protagonists as defenders of their homes against environmental threats. This resonates on multiple levels for readers. We've seen, for example, how climate activism built around distant places – the polar bears, Antarctica, the Amazon – can feel abstract. People might care in a conceptual way, but it's different from the visceral response to something close to home, like flash floods in Texas, rains in North Carolina, or flooding in New York. In Nicole Helget's *The End of the Wild* (2018), for example, the eleven-year-old protagonist struggles to accept the imminent destruction of her home woods, which the fracking company wants to turn into the site of a wastewater pond, as a price for new jobs that her impoverished community in the Kentucky mountains desperately needs. These immediate, local events evoke stronger emotional responses. Authors often use the connection to home – local landscapes, familiar environments – as a tool to communicate something deeper: that we are embedded creatures. We are not separate individuals existing outside our environments. We are shaped by, and part of, these human and non-human spaces. And with that embeddedness comes responsibility. That's a powerful and necessary message for today.

**Sara Shahwan:** I would like to bring attention to an Arabic YA book, called *ست الكل* [*Against the Tide*] (2013), by the Palestinian-Jordanian author Taghreed Najjar. This short novel tells the story of Yusra, a 15-year-old girl who becomes the first fisherwoman in Gaza. After her father, a fisherman, is disabled in a tunnel collapse while trying to get a motor for his boat, Yusra takes on his profession to support her family. The novel immerses readers in the daily realities of life in Gaza, where environmental, social, and political injustices intersect constantly. Yusra's story unfolds as one of “eco-sumud”, manifested through her efforts to refurbish/reuse her father's fishing boat and sustain her ancestral connection with the sea. The scene where Yusra confronts the Israeli naval patrol ships surrounding her boat is a profound example of resistance to settler colonial violence and dispossession. It shows how Gaza's local landscape – the sea, the three-mile fishing limit, the militarised maritime border – shapes young people's lives and struggles for justice. Throughout the novel, Yusra's personal coming-of-age story is entwined with depictions of structural injustice tied to place: overfishing caused by restricted zones, environmental degradation, family losses, harsh economic conditions and the political constraints of the blockade. The sea becomes both a literal and symbolic borderland – where steadfastness and identity are negotiated daily. It also embodies a merger of the local and the global as this small besieged spot becomes a destination for transnational solidarity. The book is based on the true story of Madleen Kolab, the first fisherwoman in Gaza, after whom the Madleen boat in the 2025 Freedom Flotilla was named. When I reread the book recently, I thought about how a young reader might encounter Yusra's story in fiction, then follow real-

world news about the flotilla attempting to break the illegal blockade of Gaza. *Against the Tide* mobilises the Gaza coastline, which is an intensely local, threatened and bordered landscape, to explore questions of justice and belonging, of *eco-sumud* and global solidarity.

**Jesus Montaña:** We talked a lot earlier about non-fiction, and I think this connects beautifully. Non-fiction makes its own claims, of course, but what's interesting is the idea that the setting is always real, even if the characters are fictional. In a way, the land itself is non-fiction. We can point to places that are entirely real, even if the stories built on top of them are fictional. There's something compelling about that: a real landscape overlaid with fictional characters complicates the idea of total fictionality. I don't have this fully worked out yet, but from our conversation, it seems that the land remains 'real' even when everything else is invented. And I think you're right – sometimes catastrophes bring this into sharper focus. A disaster happens in a real place, and that place carries its reality into the fiction.

**Marek Oziewicz:** It works both ways too. If characters have a clear concept of what home is, they often also have a sense of what is not home, or what belongs to others. A middle-grade book by Scottish author Barbara Henderson, called *Wilderness Wars* (2018), is set on an uninhabited island in the Outer Hebrides. Children of workers are sent there because a luxury resort is being built. But then the island fights back. The animals fight back. The wind, the weather, the ocean – they all resist. The children are the first to realise this. They see that humans are destroying the island's ecosystems. The children tell the adults that they don't want to fight with the island's nonhuman inhabitants. It's a perceptive story that goes beyond human-centred ideas of home and belonging, showing how landscapes can assert their own agency.

### QUESTION THREE

How do YA texts navigate the tension between individualised empowerment narratives and the need for collective political action?

**Jesus Montaña:** At its core, I think this is a formal question. By that I mean it's a question tied to the novel form. Much of what we read in YA comes in the form of novels. There are some short stories, of course, but mostly it's novels. And the novel form, by its very nature, has a kind of singularity to it. It's usually driven by a single character or a small number of characters, and even if the narrative shifts between two or three perspectives, you're still essentially getting one vision, one focus. I think that creates some difficulties. And I wonder whether, as we move further into a more digital age or into different narrative forms, some of this emphasis on individualism might be unpacked. But it's also partly historical. There's this longstanding narrative tradition – people like to save things. We like to save the environment, we like to save others, we like to travel across the world and save people. Part of the issue comes from the novel form, and part of it comes from this broader cultural history that

privileges the individual hero. This then makes its way into YA, where it becomes problematic because the very form itself keeps reproducing that structure over and over again. At the same time, I do think there are measures being taken to push against this. Even within single-vision, single-focus novels, there's more emphasis on collective action – on showing how teamwork builds something larger, and how protagonists work with others and become part of bigger groups.

**Marek Oziewicz:** That's an excellent point. I can see how it also applies not just to the novel as a form, but also to literature for young audiences more broadly. Psychologically – psycho-emotionally – one of the most important tasks for young people is to figure out who you are. Who am I as an individual? How am I different from others? There are two forces at play. One is the need to belong. Teenagers, especially, have this incredible need to belong. The other force is the search for identity: what makes me *me*, what makes me different from everyone else? These two powerful forces come to the fore in many narratives for young people. One of the key questions those narratives pose is about individual agency: what can you do, and what would you do in this specific situation? A lot of YA grapples with these questions, including the limits of agency – because no matter what you want to achieve, there are always constraints. Alongside this, though, there's also a strong emphasis on building coalitions and working together, usually through groups of friends. What I find particularly interesting – and what seems more pronounced in literature by authors of colour and Indigenous authors – is the presence of intergenerational coalitions. For example, you often see grandparents or parents working alongside children. In most traditional Euro-American literature, there tends to be a sharp separation between young people and adults. Often parents are killed off or removed, leaving the kids on their own. There's little intergenerational bonding or solidarity. In works by Indigenous and Latinx authors, by contrast, intergenerational support is powerful and central. Much of the agency that young people develop comes from being supported by adults and communities, including non-human communities. This is surely a generalization, but it's illustrated by many works: Darcie Little Badger's *A Snake Falls to Earth* (2021), Aiden Thomas' *Cemetery Boys* (2020), Pam Muñoz Ryan's *Echo* (2015), or Brian Young's *Healer of the Water Monster* (2021). In these stories, we see not just human intergenerational coalitions but also human/non-human ones, with animal beings, wind beings, water beings, and elemental and spiritual entities. It's a different model, I think, and it's gaining prominence. This can be seen, for example, in Adam Gidwitz's *The Inquisitor's Tale* (2016), Brian Selznick's *Big Tree* (2023), Dave Eggers' *The Eyes and the Impossible* (2023), or Peter Brown's *The Wild Robot* trilogy (2016-2023).

**Lara Saguisag:** I wonder whether it comes back to how the YA genre itself is scaffolded in a way that centres the individual. So much YA is written in the first person, and its historical foundations are tied to the coming-of-age story of one specific character. I wonder if the genre itself, by design, promotes this sense of individualism. If we accept the premise that YA is largely a US invention, then maybe by default it celebrates individualism, which is such a huge value in US culture. It might be a genre that tends to teach young people self-sufficiency and autonomy, rather than values like reciprocity and mutual aid. Now I don't want to discount

individual actions. Individual actions matter – they can signal or contribute to shifts in cultural behaviour. One person's action can influence others, helping us to shift toward more respectful relationships with both the more-than-human world and with one another. It might be worth distinguishing between individualistic actions that serve and satisfy one's needs and individual actions that one undertakes in the service of others. I wonder whether YA can help us explore and articulate that distinction. Of course, at the end of the day, as much as I think there is value to individual action and individual empowerment, YA should also work toward holding corporations and the state responsible. There's been this displacement of responsibility, where we become so anxious about our individual carbon footprints while the real crimes are being committed by corporations and the states that enable them. Acknowledgement of such harms and misdeeds has to be part of the narrative.

**Annika Herb:** Something I feel like I keep coming up against is the way dystopian fiction often simplifies things by offering that symbolic figurehead of the individual. And I feel like I'm going to be a bit mean to dystopian fiction here, which I don't mean to be, but it can really flatten these dynamics. It gives us this figure of the lone hero taking down a corrupt government and changing everything. There's power in that – it can be quite cathartic – but at the same time, the horror and the possibilities, as well as the potential, are removed or defanged. I think there's a kind of distancing that happens in some of these genre texts. Because of the fictionalising – through time, through setting, through the genre itself – the resonance of the local can be lost. Fictionalisation creates distance. It makes these scenarios something we can experience safely, but not necessarily something that calls us to action in the way contemporary fiction, or even non-fiction, might. That said, I've also seen this done in powerful ways in both dystopian and contemporary fiction. For example, *The Tribe* series (2012-2015) by Ambelin Kwaymullina, an Indigenous Australian author, is a dystopian series that draws on Indigenous knowledges, epistemologies, and forms of resistance and empowerment, offering a powerful decolonizing lens. The series looks at collective empowerment and collective political action that goes beyond the human – encompassing the living, the non-living, the human, the non-human, the more-than-human – and how these are entangled. It examines the human impact of colonisation on the environment and reaches a culmination that draws deeply on Indigenous epistemologies of connection. The lead character does follow aspects of the individual empowerment narrative, but the series consistently disrupts that through its emphasis on family, community, and the land. The tribe is not just the humans; it's the more-than-human, the non-human, the bush, the land that sustains and is sustained by the characters. This is especially significant in the Australian context, where Indigenous Australians have lived through and continue to live in a dystopia because of attempted genocide and ongoing colonial violence. That thread of survival, of connection, runs through the series. It shows that the individual *is* the collective, and those connections are so profoundly entangled.

**Sara Shahwan:** I think there's always been that tension between the individual hero or saviour figure – the character shouldering the responsibility of saving the planet – and collective

action in many environmental texts. But I think this is increasingly being balanced by situating the individual within family, within wider communities, and showing the connections that make collective change possible. One example I'm thinking of here is *Where the River Runs Gold* (2019) by Sita Brahmachari. It follows the familiar empowered individual journey of Shifa as she tries to escape the ironically named Freedom Fields, along with the oppressive regime that deprives people of their rights and access to nature. Environmental and social justice are deeply entangled here – the climate crisis is directly linked to the people's struggle for freedom. Shifa's journey is about escaping the Freedom Fields, returning to her family and community, and showing that nature can still survive. What I find powerful is that, although her journey is central, the ending shifts the focus to collective action. The novel balances the individual journey with a blueprint for political action, reflecting how change happens in reality – through communities coming together, as we see in real-life climate and political protests involving young people. Another interesting element introduced in *Where the River Runs Gold* is the formation of a "truth council", where all the stories of the regime's atrocities are recorded to protect future generations. This shows young readers the importance of preserving their narratives and voices, and of countering *memoricide* – the deliberate erasure of cultural memory. Remembering what happened is essential for intergenerational justice, ensuring that not only the present but also future generations are protected.

**Jesus Montaña:** One of the hardest things, I think, is that when we talk about intergenerational dynamics, we tend to think in very traditional terms, within people who are living now. You know, the classic grandmother-mother-daughter type of structure. But one of the more interesting things – especially in Latinx works, such as *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) by Rudolfo Anaya, the *Magical Cycle of the Seasons* picture books (1997-2001) by Francisco X. Alarcón and Maya Christina Gonzalez, and *The Last Cuentista* (2021) by Donna Barba Higuera – is the idea of being a good descendant and a good ancestor. It's not just about valuing our ancestors; it's also about asking: can you be a good ancestor to your descendants? Are you working for your descendants? In other words, are you learning about your culture and traditions so that you can pass them on? Interestingly, some dystopian novels explore this idea. They ask: what did you do? How were you complicit in what's about to happen? What will you do for those to come? This idea leads to a moral reckoning: it shifts the focus onto us, and what it means to be good ancestors to future generations.

**Marek Oziewicz:** This brings to mind the use of ghosts. Darcie Little Badger, for example, has ghost animals and ghost people. There's a sense of a larger continuity and community of beings that rolls through history. Even though some people and beings are visible when they're alive and then less visible when they're dead, they're still there. It's an expression of extended kinship – being part of a kinship group that extends beyond the living and includes natural elements too, such as for example in Carole Lindstrom and Michael Goade's *We Are Water Protectors* (2020). I've seen different articulations of this extended kinship rationale in many works, especially by North American Indigenous authors.

**Lara Saguissag:** That idea of continuity across time and community is expressed in non-fiction texts by young activists. For example, we have Xiuhtezcatl Martinez's *We Rise: The Earth Guardians Guide to Building a Movement That Restores the Planet* (2017) and Vanessa Nakate's memoir *A Bigger Picture: My Fight to Bring a New African Voice to the Climate Crisis* (2021). On the surface, these works highlight exceptional young individuals who are uniquely talented and motivated. But, when you read these books carefully, you'll see how the authors use their platforms to celebrate other young people and to highlight intergenerational collaboration. Even though the books focus on their individual work, they model collaboration and acknowledgment of others within their memoirs and non-fiction.

#### QUESTION FOUR

How do you approach YA literature as a space for exploring justice, not just as a theme, but as a method, practice, or relational ethic?

**Sara Shahwan:** YA literature can be, and is, a space for unearthing the intertwined colonial and capitalist roots of our environmental problems. Exposing those causes allows young people to spot inconsistencies or contradictions in the narratives they encounter, and also to start questioning them. More YA novels are now offering counternarratives, with a call to action and a vision for an equitable world. They invite readers to forge solidarities across different communities, different places, and different bodies. That, to me, feels like one of the most powerful possibilities of YA.

**Lara Saguissag:** The way I was thinking about this question is: how do we interact with YA literature beyond simply reading it? When I think about justice as a method, a practice, or a relational ethic, I think about how we move from the text to the context – how the reading experience challenges us to act, to rethink, to engage differently with the world. Some of the YA texts I've read have pushed me to complicate my own deeply held beliefs about justice, particularly environmental justice. For example, Indigenous authors' writing has profoundly shaped my thinking, especially Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) and its sequel, *Hunting by Stars* (2021). These novels connect current environmental crises to past and present forms of colonialism: they trace a line from land dispossession to fossil fuel extraction, and then imagine a near future in which Indigenous peoples' bone marrow – containing their dreams – is being extracted. Reading these books has forced me to move away from thinking about Indigenous peoples in monolithic or romanticised terms. Within the novels, Indigenous characters disagree on what resistance and survival look like and thus make different choices. Some characters choose to participate in extractive systems. These books challenge the settler-colonial fantasy of Indigenous peoples as mystical caretakers who have all the answers to settlers' problems. Instead, they push me to understand that centring Indigenous knowledge in conceptualisations of environmental justice must mean prioritising Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty.

**Jesus Montaña:** That makes a lot of sense to me. It was also a seminal moment for me when I stopped thinking about ‘the environment’ as simply land, and ‘people’ as simply people, and began to consider how knowledge and sovereignty bring those together. Sovereignty is essential to knowledge: knowledge has to be practised on and through land. If communities don’t have access to their land, how can they create the change they want? As a teacher, I’ve become increasingly interested in knowledge production, including where knowledge comes from, how it’s passed down, how it resists erasure, and what counts as knowledge. Is it cultural capital? Is it practical? Is it relational? YA literature has challenged me to rethink these questions. Authors like Darcie Little Badger and Brian Young (as we have mentioned), or texts from the civil rights era like Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* (1977) and Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), ask how knowledge and stories survive, and how they can help us heal land and community. These books push me to reconsider what kinds of knowledge are privileged, how they’re valued, and how they might offer different pathways to justice.

**Marek Oziewicz:** To me, considering this issue opens two other questions. What kind of creatures are we – meaning how we learn, remember, and know things? And the other question concerns the historical moment in which we find ourselves today. For the first question – what kind of creatures we are – all of my scholarship has really driven home the idea that we have co-evolved with stories. Our brains have evolved for narrative understanding. Stories are a fundamental part of human cultures because stories are how we learn, how we remember, how we make connections. Stories offer us lenses to see things from one perspective, but also to understand that one can see them from other perspectives too. Stories are multiplying, indexable knowledge structures that help us make sense of the world and create mental-behavioural protocols by which we act. Stories also inform our sense of right and wrong. They’re extremely important filters for processing reality and conceptualizing justice. This was pretty much a core argument in *Justice in Young Adult Speculative Fiction* in 2015: narrative fiction and stories are one of the primary spaces where negotiations about rights, responsibilities, obligations, and togetherness versus individualism take place. This conversation is essential to any human society. It’s also essential to democracy: how we divide responsibilities, how we build societies. Of course, we also have laws and legal norms. We draw on these tools to figure out responsibility, accountability, intention, and other notions. But I think literature is even more important than law as a system for considering justice, because many aspects of justice are harder to capture by the law. The legal system is rough; it often fails when it comes to the nitty-gritty details of actual human lives and situations. Literature is one of those key spaces where considerations of justice are explored through extended simulations. If that’s true, then literature itself is a method of building civic understanding. It helps us develop ways of thinking, but also to grapple with things we don’t understand, disagree with, or see differently. That’s why discussions of literature matter. When you read a book, watch a film or play a game, it’s your own personal experience: you bring your own filters to it and interact with the narrative in your own way. The advantage of using stories in classrooms and other educational settings is that a group of people gets to interact with the same text. They read the same book, or watch the same film, and then they

share perspectives. As every teacher knows, if a group of students read the same book, many will notice one thing, but others will notice something completely different. Even immediately after reading, different details stand out for different readers. Those conversations – when you discuss your reactions, your understandings of what the book is doing, its cultural work – that’s the best space for learning that we as human beings have developed in our 300,000 years of evolutionary history. Discussion is actually both a method and a practice. And, of course, it’s relational, because we develop this understanding in interaction with others.

**Annika Herb:** This is an interesting question for me, because I keep coming back to the notion of purpose. And I don’t mean purpose in a narrow, didactic sense; YA literature doesn’t have to ‘teach’ readers to be activists or tell them what to think. Sometimes its function is simply to bear witness. It can be that space of simply being seen, of catharsis through recognition and the sharing of different experiences. I think YA can be a fantastic avenue to explore that – whether it’s navigating where those feelings can go when they’re untapped or unable to be expressed, or offering a form of expression in itself. But I think it’s just as much about hope. And of course, we could bring in all those famous quotes about hope in children’s literature and how hope emerges in YA, especially when we’re thinking about environmental justice and where we’re at. But I think we’re seeing more honest texts these days – texts that explore the balance between grief and anger, hope and hopelessness, and offer readers a way to sit with those entanglements. It doesn’t have to be simplified or pure. It can hold genuine rage at the situation we’ve been put in, where we are, without our consent, being forced to enable and contribute to sometimes. Thinking about that brought me back to method, because I’m also a YA writer. And when I’m working, I find it really hard to write YA without those elements. I think: how could we do it? I don’t know if we can write YA authentically in practice without engaging with these ideas in some form. I think that’s just the way we are in the world – the way we engage with this literature. And that’s the power of YA. At its core, YA has always been about resistance and empowerment. So, I think you can’t write YA, in terms of method, without that. But I also think you can’t fake it. Readers sniff out inauthenticity immediately. I find myself looking ahead, and I cannot wait to see what people will be writing as more young adults come of age in the Anthropocene, young people who are existing in these times of crisis, who are experiencing wars and environmental devastation, and who are gaining such clarity and a resistance to dominant narratives, especially colonial ones, that try to reinforce existing structures.

**Sara Shahwan:** If it’s not authentic, young adults won’t buy into the narrative. Parents are no longer in control of what they’re reading, so it has to be authentic. It has to offer them something they can relate to – a space where they can express their anger, as you mentioned. And with all the crises we’re living through – the anxieties, the eco-anxiety – there has to be an outlet that validates those feelings. At the same time, if it’s dystopian all the way through, we risk young readers becoming indifferent. If it’s all apocalyptic, why would they care? So there has to be hope. YA literature is the space for imagining some kind of radical hope. It’s not about simplifying the crises they’re living through or the difficult emotions they’re

experiencing, or the reality that seems unresolvable. It's about presenting a radical form of hope that's rooted in a commitment to activism and community-building. As we saw in some of the examples we discussed, it emerges through courage, truth, and standing up for what's right. That's hopeful in itself – to see characters negotiating conflicts and carving out their own routes to hope. It's powerful when YA becomes a space for fostering solidarities, connecting people across different causes and different parts of the world, and connecting the human and non-human. One of my young participants in my doctoral research, a migrant teenager, said something that really stayed with me when we were reading poetry about the environment. She said that, for her, that experience represented a “wire that connects [her] with others” (Shahwan 129). That's what YA can do – it can be a way of connection, of critique, of solidarity, of radical hope. And none of those things supplants the others.

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