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## After the Environmental Turn: Ecological Resilience in Children's and Youth Literature (Overview and Update of Issues)

**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to present an overview on the environmental turn in YACH literary studies on the example of predominantly Polish scholarship; and update the YACH research position on the future orientated studies. To achieve this, the article is divided into three parts. In the first, it conceptualises resilience as “ecological resilience” of the adolescent age and present references to other YACH literary scholars to develop the argument why are we redirected towards “after the environmental turn” within our cultures of adaptation; in the second, it illustrates “eco-resilience” in a leading example based on an intimate form of a fictional teen's diary, i.e. *The Carbon Diaries 2015* by Saci Lloyd; in the third conclusive part – it summarises this overview and update the position to explain why such a great epistemological potential for resilience studies in interpreting, teaching or just communicating global risks through YACH sources exist and can be developed further.

**Keywords:** eco-resilience; adolescence; Carbon Diaries; global risks

*For my teen son, who like Laura Brown does music.*

### INTRO

It has been over a decade since we seriously debate the ecological turn in relation to young adults' and children (YACH) literary studies at Polish academy. One of the events which influenced the development of diverse ecological approaches in Poland was the Warsaw conference “Animals and Their People” subtitled with an open-ended question “The Fall of the Anthropocentric Paradigm?” in 2014. Other events (e.g. the series of conferences “Po człowieku [After the human]” at the Silesian University or “Języki antropocenu [Languages of the Anthropocene]” at Cracow's KEN University in 2022) and publications, which followed, include but do not exhaust the topicality of environmental concerns combined, for example with the philosophical posthumanism

quest (Rogowska-Stangret 2021) and the diagnoses and conceptualisations on the Anthropocene (Bińczyk 2018; Marzec 2021). The Wrocław conference “The Environmental Turn in the Study of Children’s and Young Adult Literature” in 2022, of which this volume is partly an outcome, confirmed that the scholarship on YACH literature is present in the eco-debate from the beginning, stimulated by the human-animal comparative studies (Jarzyna 2020) and wider reception of ecocritical themes in YACH education in Poland (Czapliński, Bednarek and Gostyński 2017; Czabanowska-Wróbel and Zabawa 2017; Michalski 2022; Zdunik 2023) and planetary environmental humanities (Oziewicz 2022). Meanwhile, a specially dedicated research centre on ecological education started to operate at the Silesian University (<https://www.icbeh.us.edu.pl/>) and new eco-educational strategies are being developed for all sectors to address the global warming (e.g. Ochwat 2020; Niesporek-Szamburska and Przybyła 2021).

Observing how environmental perspectives evolve and infuse contemporary humanities, I come to the conclusion that the divide between what is ecological and what is not is just an artificial pact, which will soon evaporate. In fairness, all aspects of our life and work activities have environmental consequences and I really believe sooner or later we will not even add in our methodological design the prefixes “eco” or “enviro”, “green” or “blue”; at the same time – all children and youth studies will not only be transdisciplinary but also ecological.

Because of how this article is positioned in the whole volume of the journal, its aim is to remind ourselves how much has been done in Poland. I, obviously, enumerated just few examples in relation to the international field of ecological education and theory of literature. This is also optimistic that ecocriticism and animal studies are used as frames but, going further, my primary goal here is to self-reflect on the stage we are at now. That is why I indicate my position as “after the environmental turn” and I am interested in the future theoretical lens and modes of ecological reading, communicating, and educating the youngest generations as if the ecological context was always implied, always real and employed as a task even through fictitious strategies. The key term to study these lens and modes is “resilience” as it feeds into the discussion on what kind of adaptation strategies we can already experience and practice with youngsters through literary sources.

Therefore, I divided this article into three parts: in the first, I will conceptualise resilience as “ecological resilience” of the adolescent age and present references to other YACH literary scholars to develop the argument why are we redirected towards “after the environmental turn” within our cultures of adaptation; in the second, I will apply it to my leading example on the basis of an intimate form of a fictional teen’s diary; in the third – I will conclude and summarise this overview and update my position to explain why I notice such a great epistemological potential for resilience studies in interpreting, teaching or just communicating global risks through YACH sources.

## ECOLOGICAL RESILIENCE

The concept “resilience” originates from psychological research where individuals were first statically described as “invulnerable” to life challenges and problems but later resilience evolved into a wider field of studies on “the dynamic interaction between the individual and their environment” (Rudd, Meissel and Meyel 2021). This vastly affects education and environmental studies providing new contexts for discussion, including literary field. Especially significant for developing what I would like to frame as eco-resilience is period of adolescence defined very early by psychologists of education and YACH development as a separate period of human development and characterized as challenging for its emotional intensity (Hall, 1904). Since then, many authors have stressed various challenges during adolescence, including mental health and socio-cultural aspects of their transition into adulthood (Tayfur et al. 2021) but not much has been so far acknowledged and researched in the transdisciplinary model to address both, the nowadays ecological crisis and adolescent anxieties. Here, particularly, I see a huge potential to push forward the eco-resilience as a concept for adaptation studies in cultures and societies in the Anthropocene and combine them with studies on YACH literatures.

In my view, it is worthy to differentiate the *eco-resilience* from other resiliencies. Although the eco-resilience involves knowledge-potential built up on the psychological studies that can be traced back in the semantic layers of health, strength, flexibility and ability to recover of an individual or a group, it also adds up the ecological stratum as a necessary component of one's development. Therefore, it should be particularly addressed how does it operate within the vast area of YACH studies. To understand better the eco-resilience, adolescence is not only constrained here by the biological age and youth developmental stage (Waddell 2018). It is also perceived as a wider term of storied and narrated life to analyse more possibilities in responses, which an individual can resiliently generate towards various eco-anxieties and challenges. YACH sources enable us to dive into the most vulnerable and emotionally triggering period in the human development not only because of pedagogics or psychology but because we are in urgent search for modelling our anthropological systems of knowledge in the time of ecological distortion. Imagine, as if we all were teenagers in the time presented to us rather apocalyptically grim, how would you respond? Some influential authors already diagnosed this ecocritical period within the human condition and would even maximise the adolescence by saying:

But now we're basically all teenagers, being fucked over by an adult world that is repressing our transformative powers but that only really has death to offer us in exchange. So what we need is a strategy for breaking the loop. We need an escape trajectory. (Morton and Boyer 2021: 22)

In other words, poor ecological management around the world and related political challenges to mitigate warming climate push us further to study radical adaptation strategies and what is debated here as the eco-resilience.

Adolescents are also part of YA-centred turn in children's literature studies as Faulkner and Zolkos notice, since they are treated as "barometer[s] of social and cultural health" (in Deszcz-Tryhubczak 2016: 23) and where the greatest effort is put on inclusiveness and empowerment of their civic participatory practices (Deszcz-Tryhubczak 2016). Adolescent activism seems to be rising and real – the case of climate strikes, youth eco-anarchy and the influence of Greta Thunberg, of course – but a more universal approach to ecological resilience is needed to diagnose the period we are all in, both young and adult humans, in the lens of philosophical anthropology. What I mean here is an approach that will include also non-activist perspectives and will be more related to looking at YACH literature outside of a box to be studied not only by YACH scholars. The position of being (and reading!) "after the environmental turn" means that we investigate YACH texts to remind ourselves what an adolescent attitude is: for example, to develop the self, be happy and accepted, and experience oneself in this intensive dynamics of conflict and mitigation where the future-I is a flashing project in a blurred horizon of time and space. Eco-resilience is about not to resign of oneself where the future is objectively fragile and even lost, or is perceived always as part of this overcapitalistic, aggressively competitive world that does not give the YA individual skills to mindfully develop itself. What this text emphasizes anew is that we, adults, are ecologically repositioned closer to our YACH fellows or counterparts. We face the same problems as adolescents who were thrown into the world that is not theirs. There are no generational gaps to play out anymore. The meaning of lost planet is true and objective for all like in some *Darkest Danse Macabre* – now we look for strategies to dance a bit longer.

*CARBON DIARIES,*  
OR HOW TEENS PERFORM RESILIENT VULNERABILITY

This article does not pose didactic aims such as activating young students or engaging them in the climate debate. I want to come back to a very successful book for YA – *The Carbon Diaries 2015* (Lloyd 2008) – because of looking for ideas how through literature we can share and communicate the eco-resilience as a transgenerational project or as a planetary, consensual knowledge which we also recognize as living in the Anthropocene with warming climate and on the verge of extinction. How can we possibly rethink crossings and weird connections between generations of boomers and zoomers, Millennials and X-es and/or why the teenagers provide us with a model for epistemological retake to global risks?

In my attempt to understand better the eco-resilient approach to adolescence after the environmental turn, I follow Saci Lloyd, a well-recognized writer for young adults and teenagers' educator from East London who involves in creative writing workshops and promotes her students works (in different media of visual arts and literature) around the UK. Another, maybe more important inspiration that I personally heard from Lloyd (I met her at one of the conferences) was a question she is involved with in all her activities with young adults, particularly of less-privileged background, representatives of people of colour and various disabilities. Namely, how to amplify the weak and vulnerable teens' voice – the voice of the unheard side of our societies whose creative practice unfolds on the margins of the dominant discourses and silently disappears. And this need to include teens' perspective, not only in the climate politics but in how we simulate climate knowledge, was raised and debated by Lloyd before the climate strikes started to be organised by international youth organisations and Greta Thunberg. Now *Carbon Diaries* and their real fictitious author, Laura Brown (who is my son's age-mate) perfectly problematises the world where the fundamental human rights are even more threatened by the global risks. A "normal teenager" who would just want to be happy and pass her school exams, and who can now redirect us towards asking about all adults' world and humans as endangered species. In fact, from the fictitious *Carbon Diaries* we can follow such research and creative projects as "climate diaries" conducted around the globe with the most vulnerable and unheard communities (e.g. with people of colour in Senegal, see Giacomelli and Walker 2021).

A refreshed discussion over realism definitely helped to position fiction as contributive to ecological resilience. Literary scholars rejected the representational model of mirroring reality and empowered the intelligibility of techniques and devices which *make* the world real (Barthes, 1968; see also Kołodziejczyk and Michułka 2013/2014). This way, also very unrealistic, as imaginary and dystopic visions of reality – like the genre cli-fi – started to be part of the discussion how to communicate such complicated issues to youngsters as global warming. A term "cli-fi", coined by the journalist and educator Dan Bloom, was intensively debated a few years ago (Sheth 2023) and followed by many scholarly publications, for example by Adeline Johns-Putra (e.g. 2019). Other YACH literary texts in this genre can include Jacob Sackin's *Islands and Iglu*, Julie Bertagna's *Exodus trilogy*, Cameron's Stretcher's *The Water Wars*, Georgia Clark's *Parched*, and S. D. Crockett's *After the Snow* (Mossner 2017). In Poland, as a first cli-fi exemplification is considered *Brightness* by Maja Wolny (Piechota 2022). And although Saci Lloyd will also be included in this international cli-fi collection, I think her practical experience as a teacher and teens' instructor distinguishes her approach and enables to accentuate other layers of interpreting *The Carbon Diaries* or, more importantly, upgrade

the debate on addressing the global risks and challenges through fiction and the adolescent age.

Let me first recreate some arguments in the debate, which positioned *The Carbon Diaries* within the cli-fi and environmental turn before I will test some other arguments for going beyond and interpreting what does it mean “after the environmental turn” in this case.

Lloyd has been noticed by prominent ecocritics as part of a literary turn in addressing climate warming in her fiction (especially, Mossner 2013; Trexler 2015). And, what the empirical ecocritics recognise in the dystopic fiction of *The Carbon Diaries* as successful (e.g. Mossner 2013), this kind of literary mastery which is never “too depressing and overbearing” (70) to discuss living with the climate catastrophe here and now, and where the climate is a real agent. Or – what Adam Trexler noted as interrogating “the emotional, aesthetic, and living experience of the Anthropocene” (Trexler 2015: 6). Trexler who includes *The Carbon Diaries* in his *Anthropocene Fictions* points also to a particular context or climate in the global politics, namely the re-election of George W. Bush in 2004, when “there appeared to be little hope of American leadership on environmental issues” (8). *The Carbon Diaries* were published in 2008 and the author, Saci Lloyd, speaks of her political standing and contextualises some of her creative decisions in writing:

[...] a fictional notebook penned by the supremely caustic 15-year old Laura Brown, during the first year of carbon rationing in London. I too wanted to explore a society where denial and ignorance, this time about the effects of climate change, were pervasive. And believe me, stupidity was the order of the day back then. Dubya was leading the US charge against the Kyoto treaty, the Chinese were opening a coal-fired plant every two seconds and nobody seemed to give a damn, apart from some yoghurt-knitting hippies who hadn't paid taxes since 1973. (The Guardian 2015)

Trexler recognizes a new “eco-nomic” (2015: 26) dimension of climate warming and Lloyd’s input into discussing new concerns of the Anthropocene and social tensions between different professional groups (206) through a teen character of Laura Brown who under the harsh conditions of energy rationing and disasters, has to “reevaluate the social structures that hold the world together” (106) and not forget to laugh.

To understand “Laura Brown’s effect” within and beyond cli-fi genre dedicated for teens, I will focus on the first part of her diaries when she is 16 and she is trying to make a sense out of huge chaos that surrounds her at the beginning of some post big storm era and other hazardous weather events (massive snow drop, lack of rain), which accompany the UK’s pioneering politics at a global scale to implement energy consumptions limits in an authoritarian style, centrally led by the state politics, like in communism rationing

economies, and envisioned by the “carbon cards”. What Mossner names “enjoyable” for young readers (2013: 70) through Laura’s case is managing or redirecting frustration and anger toward feeling serious about the disastrous conditions of their world (Mossner 2013: 71). It looks also as if Laura is the best informed about the nationwide carbon rationing (Mossner 2013: 74). Even writing a diary can be political and so it is a blender for her intimate, normal teen life to mix the private stories (updates on her boyfriend Ravi, friendships, passion for music, playing in a band, family and school matters), with humour and sarcasm (Trexler 2015: 203–204) but also Laura Brown’s diary is a cautious, attentive filter of understanding the tricky historicity of the moment, to which I shall come back later.

In other words, such a diary is a powerful tool that can be used with your students when reading Lloyd’s book and asking about the global risks stamp, like the past Covid-pandemics or climate events, on the teens’ experience of everydayness. It is a tool that does not get old especially for young adults whose “narcistic” I-perspective should be accepted as their dominant way of narrating and interpreting world in the adolescent age. But what can be done more to preserve hope at young readers, which responsibility to give structure is handed over YACH writers as the biggest challenge in addressing climate warming according to Mossner (2013: 71, 79). I think, perhaps, what can we do further is to emphasise the way how teens structure reality and what is their “model” way of recognizing the reality even at the end of the world.

Rediscovering eco-resilient adolescence in the context of *The Carbon Diaries* and through Laura Brown’s profile means to come back to negotiating popular needs with the cracking world as teens have, i.e. to feel normal and accepted, to balance and express emotions, to have fun, to stay in piece with the (adult) world, to love and be loved, to have deep friendships and experience deep connections, to practice own’s passions and to be recognised as a creative human self.

Partly, it is the humour and playfulness as performatives that make this literary example a truly existential and eco-therapeutic tool for communicating culture of adaptation to global risks after the environmental turn. Lloyd is an author who sincerely confesses: “We’ve got to use humour more. It works! I’m not gothic enough as a person to write dystopia)” (Saci Lloyd, on Twitter in 2015). Humour and what the author expressed as her influence – one of Mark Twain’s stories, i.e. about Huckleberry Finn, explains that to address serious problems, one does not need seriousness but a smart irony and a gist of creative authenticity:

When I first read Huckleberry Finn at age 13 or so I laughed out loud at this audacious introduction, immediately falling in love with the sheer exuberance of an author who nailed his ironic colours to the mast in such a bold fashion. Here was a man who didn’t take himself too seriously, I thought, and liked him on the spot. I still do, some 30 years later. (The Guardian 2015)

Therefore, first experiencing herself as a teen reader was a method to become the author of this popular and funny sequel narrated by young, female character Laura Brown in *The Carbon Diaries 2015* and *2017*. Moreover, hiding educational needs behind the priority of reaching her own London-based students, with such a serious topic as global warming, situates her books strategically among other successful books for YACH and not only within the rigid environmental perspective.

However, because of the direct ecological contexts described in *The Carbon Diaries* – the world is going through some major catastrophes, the Thames floods, people experience droughts, London is disabled by power cuts and a specially designed system for rationalizing energy consumption is undemocratically introduced by British authorities – Laura Brown’s diary can be read as a post-apo cli-fi text and makes us laugh to distance ourselves from the all too encompassing problems which are beyond her control. And, without excluding these disastrous contexts, it is primarily an initiative novel and this is where I position the eco-resilience, especially on the basis of *The Carbon Diaries 2015* (Lloyd 2008), to which I am referring here mostly.

The initiation in the adolescent age is a phenomenon described in YACH studies, especially after the feminist turn and redefinition of masculinity and femineity as constructs (Nosek, Chrobak 2022: 11). The scholars also point out that we do not refer to the traditional genre classification, as about female protagonists and for female readers but to “girls’ narratives” (there). In the history of YACH literature, perhaps the first fully emancipated from gender constructs and pedagogical aims was Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* (Misiak 2022: 172). Therefore, Laura Brown can truly embody an adolescent figure of a teen whose resilience is a developmental journey through constructs of reality in comparison to Carroll’s *Alice*. And Laura’s reality is also doubly challenged: by the global climate and energy crisis that affects her family and surroundings and by the “normal” teen problems how to deal with her sister, parents, friends, teachers and her first love and how not to lose her young and vulnerable self in the weird reality.

Carroll’s creation of a sense of weirdness and strange as nonsense – which is also one of the key repeating terms in *The Carbon Diaries* to grasp all incomprehensibilities and move further – is always as if ecologically inscribed in the critical conditions of the world. The weird is an eco-ontological concept to combine the intimate with the public and the absurdity of their messy connection. Timothy Morton, who keeps coming back to fragments from the *Alice* in his philosophical *Dark Ecology*, redefines this sense of strange and weird in the ontologically and epistemologically deepest way as an unescapable loop: “We begin to learn from the no-way-out-ness of *Alice*, trying to leave the Looking Glass House and ending up back at the front door” (2016: 148). And for Laura it is a process of discovering the doubly structured loop, how her messy teen

reality is interfered with the gigantic messy chaos of a falling world, as in this fragment from her diary describing another unexpected power cut:

I've just had a strange thing happen. I was on my way home from practice, walking down icy Blackheath High Street when everything just died all around me. All the street lamps, the shop lights. It's the first time I've been outside when it's happened. I was by an internet zone and the monitors went black. The strange thing is nobody reacted for ages. It felt like I'd dropped into a dream. The cut went all the way across South London. Before, it's only been in a few small neighbourhoods. The power's back on now, but I still feel kind of shaky, like something's changed underneath. (Lloyd 2008: 26)

This experience is dark, heavy and deep for a young girl who just wants everything to be normal, not political (45) but she feels, like Carroll's Alice, as if "dropped into a dream". The form of a diary reminds us that the experience is contextualized in her individual self and at the same time – it is part of her I-teen-becoming journey. Morton would say that Lloyd grasped here the sense of "essential weirdness", a different kind of logic that affects the basic experience of time and space scales, and where being contradicts appearing (Morton 2016: 5) but in fact it is also a gap between these two (65). Laura, as other female characters in literature, recognizes herself in this strange aesthetic loop of being inside (the catastrophe) and appearing on the outside of it (as an individual). Alone, she is vulnerable to these weird features of reality, as we all are, but as a teen who resiliently repositions herself in a group, she is also empowered in reorienting her knowledge as a collective-I inside her peers. "There's no escape" – say Laura's friends, "for good or for bad, we're all in this together" (24).

The great amount of humour and playfulness in the whole narrative enables us to diagnose risks in the "weird" adolescent environment and how a resilient response can be produced beyond the catastrophic mode of the falling apart world. The comic elements, for example, include the construction of Laura's parents' figures and how their "hippie" generation is a mess, but all in all it is served in a warmhearted way. Laura's mother is an unreliable but not a toxic person. She has huge troubles in coping with the new energy consumption restrictions because from now on she can't drive her car and "is always lost on a bus somewhere" (Lloyd 2008: 15). Still, she is a mother of a teen and behaves like this, as in this extract from the mother-daughter conversation, which usually turns into the mother's monologue:

'I know I should be strong, but I feel so responsible for my generation – we're the ones who've messed it all up for you.' [...] 'Don't bite your nails, sweetie. I mean, what's going to become of you young things? Woodstock, freedom, women's rights, the Magic Bus... Don't forget, I'm your mother and I'm always here if you need to talk.'

I kept quiet. I once worked out that if Mum had actually been to Woodstock, she'd be about 70 by now, but there's no point saying anything. (12)

In this sense, Laura's teen perspective becomes an empowering model of risk narrative, where what is real, imagined and distorted by the cracking metropolis of London and Laura's status as a weak, vulnerable to intensive emotions and to the general conditions of the global crisis agent become the resource to strengthen her position as an adolescent subject in the weirdest reality of the world. This sense of weird brings resilient fun and sense of realness which she can put into creative form of her diary and included there drawings, or, for example, use it as an additional idiom to describe a schools teacher: "GPJ definitely needs more sex. She marched up and down the classroom, introducing this new enviro-presentation like she was having a really good time" (94). The world in Laura Brown's diary is not terrified like her parents, she accepts the challenges of the cracking reality and adapts to them in her own teen way, or as Morton adequately puts it: "The world it discovers is nonsensical, yet perfectly logical, and that is funny" (2016: 110).

## CONCLUSION

Through *The Carbon Diaries* Lloyd says that creating an attractive piece for teens means primarily resigning from teaching them, maybe on the contrary – eco-resilience means even learning from them. This constructivist approach is close to me since I think it is not our task now to prove the environmental or climate problems since they all affect us and our individual experience. The reality sucks and we are all teens in it so let's find ways how to adapt. Moreover, this turn to adolescence is happening in the critical and attentive humanities after environmental turn: „Don't grow up. Grow down" – Morton and Boyer quote Chris Robertson in their book *Hyposubjects. On becoming human* (2021), while in the opening chapter "Think small" the authors speak like teens who read and continue *The Carbon Diaries* narrative under the identity of adolescent "hypersubjects": "A lot of what is happening here frankly doesn't make very much sense" (13). Hypersubjects are typically but not exclusively white, male, northern, well-nourished, modern in all senses of the term. They wield reason and technology, whether cynically or sincerely, as instruments for getting things done. They command and control, they seek transcendence, they get very high on their own supply of dominion (14). Hyposubjects are the native species of the Anthropocene and only just now beginning to discover what they may be and become (14). They are necessarily feminist, antiracist, colourful, queer, ecological, transhuman and intrahuman (15). And of course, they know that reality make more nonsense than sense. This is the Laura Brown's effect to find

a transgenerational side of humanity which is related to the adolescence and can produce an eco-resilient response by all age groups.

And lastly, we need to update that the deepest backlash to our planetary problems start with the overstimulated young brains. They will bring more demand for smart, playful and well written and informed literature. It will be practice of analogical mind in contrast to digital overstimulation, reading as deep reflection and experience to rebond with reality and material world. Humour is an old YACH literature tool. Within this tradition Jerzy Cieślakowski's concept of "great play" (1967) resonates with the most influential philosophical diagnoses of our times as expressed in *The Carbon Diaries* as well. Morton in his *Dark Ecology* also provided me with some patterns of catalyzing ecological awareness beyond the anthropocentric catastrophic scenario, including the sheer, sincere playfulness of the modern weird culture.

Now, we can observe the shifts of framing children's and youth literature after the environmental turn: from didactic/pedagogic, through artistic to ecological, the concept of "resilience" adds another level to this debate. It operates like a synthetic, umbrella theory for deciphering and filtering the texts on the basis of all these criteria at once: future cultures of adaptation demand to communicate with youngsters through all these layers with respect to how the health of the human brain should be put in the centre of resilient development, for example through laughing. And we adults are part of this process as well; we are in this "weird thing" together since "we haven't got a clue what's going on [...] 'S'too surreal, man'" (Lloyd 2008: 90).

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