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# DO IT FOR THE KIDS: DISMANTLING NORMS OF THE FAMILY IN CLI-FI LITERATURE

By Maryam Khan

*“And anyway  
I was so full of energy.  
I was always running around, looking  
at this and that.*

*If I stopped  
the pain  
was unbearable.*

*If I stopped and thought, maybe  
the world  
can't be saved,  
the pain  
was unbearable.”*

**-Mary Oliver, “The Moths”**

The United States is blanketed in ice from extreme climate disaster. Sheets of frost envelope New York City and swallow all but the highest points of the city skyline. Desperate search and rescue helicopters finally locate a cluster of survivors, and the music swells as they descend to collect them. The camera pans to Jack Hall, his son, Sam, and Sam's girlfriend Laura, the protagonists of the film and survivors of the big freeze. Safe, at last. Safe from the extremes of climate. Safe from the violence of man's survival instinct. Safe to love each other. Huddled in the rescue helicopter, Sam and Laura embrace while Jack smiles on. The credits roll on *The Day After Tomorrow* <sup>1</sup>.

Director Roland Emmerich's film failed to impress reviewers. Film critic Roger Ebert dubbed the film "profoundly silly" <sup>2</sup> and found fault in its "sublimely ridiculous" premise. Despite his criticism of the project's writing and plot, he still gave the film three out of four stars. He found satisfaction, he wrote, in an ending imbued with the "restorative power" of hope. Hope is the biological promise emblemized by Laura and Sam's relationship. The 2009 environmental disaster film *2012* <sup>3</sup>, in which a series of disastrous weather events wreck the Earth, gave audiences similar catharsis. At the close of the film, Earth's survivors stand atop the Ark, a marine vessel unsubtly named, and look out across the ocean at the setting sun. Jackson Curtis and his estranged wife, who reconcile in the face of disaster, are among the few survivors. Their kids are safe at long last. The Curtis family embrace as euphoric instrumental music swells. This trope is not limited to these two films-- it is a staple of ecodisaster media. It is an effective image. In the aftermath of sheer destruction at a continental or planetary scale, the family, or the promise of one implied by a heterosexual pairing, offers hope for the future.

'Do it for your children!' cry climate activists, appealing to our sense of intergenerational responsibility. This gesture to the family makes for a compelling argument in favor of taking action against climate change. Children are the future, and families are responsible for their kin's wellbeing. The "family lens" argument is useful because it "humanizes the link between the past, present and future" and makes "complex sweeps" of time accessible through the metaphor of family <sup>4</sup>. Surveys show that the family lens has proven effective in raising awareness and changing attitudes towards climate change <sup>5</sup>. Subjects were more likely to take seriously the threat of climate change if they were presented with this argument than if they were presented with objective facts. It is this logic that undergirds the tropes employed by *2012* and *The Day After Tomorrow*.

Despite the potentially beneficial effects of the family model, the assumption that intergenerational responsibility between kin is 'scalable and equivalent' to the preservation of the planet is problematic <sup>6</sup>. The logic of the argument is anthropocentric because it makes the case of preserving the planet for the sake of future human lives. It fails to mention the millions of other species that live on the Earth. It also takes for granted man's stewardship of the Earth and its climate. Additionally, this hypothetical caters to the future citizens of the global North. The family lens grounds its logic in Western ideals of the family unit. It takes for granted that a subject will aspire to the ideal of a nuclear family. The argument conforms to this historical Western model at the exclusion of the global South, which subscribes to differing family structures. It additionally ignores the fact that the global South has already begun to see the effects of climate change to a greater extent than its Northern counterpart. The intergenerational argument problematically employs the same vernacular as that used to defend the transmission of intergenerational wealth and socioeconomic power. In doing so, it legitimizes, or at least builds from, systematic economic and social disparity. Finally, the generation model has a troubling "history in the service of patriarchy and old order." <sup>7</sup> Conservative societal structure historically privileges the nuclear family as the most sacred social group. The model's idealization of this family structure above other forms of collectivity perpetuates heterosexual and procreational narratives.

Can we envision narratives of the future without heteronormative and procreational assumptions? How do we understand centuries-long climate processes? One emerging genre of literature aims to do so. Climate change fiction, or cli-fi, is literature that deals with life in the era of the Anthropocene. Geologists

1 Emmerich, "The Day After Tomorrow."

2 Ebert, "The Day After Tomorrow Movie Review (2004): Roger Ebert."

3 Emmerich, "2012."

4 Little and Winch, "Generation: The politics of patriarchy and social change." 124-44.

5 Diprose, "Moral Geographies of Climate Change." 71-102.

6 Persson and Savulescu, "Unfit for the future: The need for moral enhancement."

7 Little and Winch, 129-44

divide the history of the planet into different epochs. The Anthropocene is the current geological epoch that is characterized by human overconsumption and fossil-fuel dependence that has permanently damaged our planet<sup>8</sup>. In their novels, cli-fi writers have explored the consequences of climate change and what it means to live in a decaying environment.

The genre of climate change fiction emerged recently. While climate narratives have existed for centuries in the form of ecopoetry and environmental fiction<sup>9</sup>, cli-fi is distinctive for engaging directly with the question of climate change. Literary critic Caren Irr contends that though fiction dealing with environmental collapse has long existed in various forms, from the work of Thoreau to that of Ballard, the genre did not formally emerge until this century<sup>10</sup>. Cli-fi was brought to public attention by the success of Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy. Since then, writers like Ruth Ozeki, Barbara Kingsolver, and Kim Stanley Robinson have published commercially successful climate fiction. These contemporary writers contextualize the motifs of historical climate narratives to the environment of the present by experimenting with "temporality, central figures, and mood"<sup>11</sup>.

"Quiet Town" by Jason Gurley<sup>12</sup> and "The Smog Society" by Chen Qiufan<sup>13</sup> are cli-fi short stories featured in "Loosed Upon the World: A Saga Anthology of Climate Fiction". The anthology, edited by sci-fi critic and *Lightspeed Magazine* editor John Joseph Adams, features short stories from accomplished science fiction writers about climate change. Gurley and Chen's stories stand out for their unique take on family dynamics. These stories do so by subverting traditional family structures and by troubling our temporal and historical understanding of climate and culture. "Quiet Town" by Jason Gurley tells the tale of those left behind to deal with the consequences of rising water levels along the coasts. Bev faces the awful realization that by accepting her late husband's skepticism of climate change and choosing to stay in their quiet suburban town, she has doomed their young son Benji. She, Benji, and their elderly neighbor Ezze all come to this bleak realization at distinct moments. Chen Qiufan's "The Smog Society" is set in an industrial city blanketed by smog. The story centers on Lao Sun, a solitary retiree who volunteers at the eponymous Smog Society to collect samples of the air. He discovers that smog levels not only correlate to levels of depression, but that the two factors feed on each other in a vicious cycle. This environmental breakthrough causes Lao Sun to reevaluate his position on raising a family.

Both stories raise questions about family in the face of disaster. How do the notions we accept without question change in the wake of environmental disaster? This paper is an exploration of how cli-fi plays with the role of temporality and scale, challenges traditional family structures, and questions the established power dynamics of families. Furthermore, this essay details how generations of family came to represent both swathes of time and a continued biological history. The stories' engagement with social structures and temporal shifts makes for a productive analysis of climate narratives

## Questions of Scale

### Creating Urgency

Outside of academic discussion, the terms 'climate' and 'weather' tend to be used interchangeably. However, the concepts are distinct in definition and usage. Climate does not take the form of an event. Climate, instead, is a "hypercomplex web of organic and inorganic factors that could not be examined independently"<sup>14</sup>. Weather, on the other hand, can be captured in discrete moments, such as by weather events like storms, droughts, or natural disasters. Climate deals with concepts at a grand scale. Weather combines factors, such as the duration, intensity, and environmental elements involved in a weather event. Climate engages with questions of

8 Stromberg, "What Is the Anthropocene and Are We in It?"

9 Adelson et al., "Nature Writing." 676-703.

10 Irr, "Climate Fiction in English."

11 Irr.

12 Gurley, "Quiet Town."

13 Chen, "The Smog Society."

14 Horn and Pakis, "Catastrophe Without Event: Imagining Climate Disaster." 55-88.

temporality, culture, and global interconnection across large swathes of time. Its complex nature refutes simple representation. Depicting a spectacular weather event like a storm in fiction is a more straightforward process, made such by the discrete nature and limited temporality of the event.

In their cli-fi short stories, Chen and Gurley must manage expectations of their readership as an audience that has come to expect a reflection of lived experiences in texts. They must neither make a spectacle of climate change nor alienate their readership for the sake of scientific accuracy. Anthropogenic climate change is a process in the *longue durée*, or long run, that cannot be understood in the context of a single lifespan. This poses a problem for cli-fi novelists. How are they to depict faithfully a perpetual and immeasurable concept without eliminating suspense or interest? To deal faithfully with the history and science of climate change is, in effect, to lose a sense of human urgency. How then can cli-fi writers depict climate and climate change in an effective manner? One method is to use weather as a scaled model.

Gurley depicts devastating global change through a spectacular, if commonplace, weather event. A strong storm rips through a placid suburban town. It upends domestic life both in the literal and metaphorical sense: its fierce winds rip laundry from drying lines, heralding the disaster that will alter how families live their lives. The storm is not the event that puts Bev, Benji, and Ezze in mortal danger. The true disaster seeps in quietly at the close of the story. The rising sea level has brought the ocean into Bev's suburban town. Bev conceives of the storm as the greater disaster of the two events; a few inches rise in water levels seem innocuous in comparison to a storm. Her mistaken assumption has dire consequences. The weather event merely prefaced the large-scale disaster that would follow. The storm is fierce and overtly dangerous. This makes Gurley's final assertion that the rising of the water is the greatest danger the suburb will face even more scary: how much worse could the water be? Scaled in this way against weather, climate disaster is urgent and terrifying. Using weather to represent climate is doubly effective as a scale of reference. First, it allows the short story's characters, who are limited to their own experience and temporality, to provide commentary on an issue that they otherwise would not perceive. Bev comments on the strength of the wind in relation to its dispersion of the Aparicio's laundry. When the water finally arrives, Bev is still tethered to such subjective description. She does not attend to the impressive volume of the water, but to the "thin ribbon" formation it presents. Second, scaled against the violence of the storm the slow but inexorable rise of the water seems less threatening.

The characters in Chen's "The Smog Society" are more aware of climate change than the characters of "Quiet Town". What differentiates the two experiences of climate change is the weather event that accompanies them. Smog is a tangible, temporally discrete, and long-term consequence of Anthropogenic climate change. It is impossible to ignore. Lao Sun struggles to breathe, cannot see more than a few meters ahead of him, and suffers from smog-related health complications. Smog has permanently changed the way city dwellers live their lives: they are "parasites burrowed into the smog". The reality of climate disaster presses in on the city's denizens with every breath they take. The sheer tangibility of the weather condition fields most arguments that skeptics may offer. They cannot deny their situation as easily as Bev can, for the smog pervades the air in a manner that water cannot.

Weather is used to study and find conclusions about climate. Lao Sun monitors the weather as a volunteer at the Smog Society. By capturing the daily Air Quality Index (AQI) the Society can keep track of how the climate changes over time. Climate change, a subtle process brought on by years of unsustainable production and excessive consumption, is emblemized by smog, a weather phenomenon. Through it, Chen imbues an urgency into the story without cheapening the complexity of the climate crisis. The Society's research eventually results in a landmark conclusion: that the weather has an adverse effect on the mental health of city dwellers, and that their unhappiness and mental health struggles further perpetuate the harsh weather. This severe weather, when studied over time, can be studied as climate. It follows, then, that climate change can exacerbate mental health issues, and that climate itself is worsened by factors like depression and anxiety. By using a weather phenomenon, the Society can make conclusions about the climate and societal reactions to climate change.

## Complex Spatiality and Temporality

Representing a concept as vast as climate through the weather is not just a useful tool to create urgency in a story. Weather events also make comprehensible the multidimensional nature of climate, which encapsulates climatic concepts of deep time and global spatiality. Without weather events to make such concepts accessible, the climate would remain obscure to all but the most qualified readership. Framing climate through the lens of weather makes macro concepts micro: it makes the global local and approaches the *longue durée* through smaller sections of time. Gurley and Chen use specific settings and the immediate plot to frame a concept of global and long-term concern.

The suburb, the site of middle-class comfort, is a fascinating setting for climate fiction. It has its roots in post-War American industry and development, tracing back to the fifties, which ushered in a renewed sense of optimism in the American Dream. Americans flocked to cities, which emerged as financial centers in the post-War boom. In peacetime, the number of marriages and births spiked, and people of all socioeconomic and racial backgrounds moved to cities to raise their families<sup>15</sup>. This was alarming to the white middle class, who felt that racially and socioeconomic diverse environments were not appropriate locations to raise a family. William Levitt offered a solution by building planned settlements on the outskirts of the city called Levittowns. Levittowns were the first truly mass-produced suburbs. Designed to appeal to the emergent White middle class, these suburbs were priced affordably and were kept racially uniform through discriminatory policies, such as redlining<sup>16</sup>. Though overt racial segregation is illegal in the present-day, racist and classist practices still inform the demographics of the suburb. Suburbs have remained largely White and middle-class, and the barriers to entry remain high for working class families and families of color.

The suburb encourages an unsustainable lifestyle. Whereas the cities built American prowess in industry, the suburbs became known as the American ideal. Its founding was made possible by local automobile production. The American automobile industry, revolutionized by Ford, helped aid the movement of middle-class employees to work in the city and back. Families now lived in larger homes instead of in space-efficient apartment buildings common in cities. The culture of the suburb encouraged spending on energy-dependent appliances and the latest goods. Even in the present day, after a series of economic crashes, the suburbs remain a site comfortable life of plentiful consumption. Instead of utilizing public transport, families buy multiple cars. They spend money on the latest technological advances. They buy trendy and mass-produced clothing and goods. However, this lifestyle is environmentally unsustainable: it encourages automobile use, creates a desire for excessive consumption, and helps suburban families turn a blind eye to climate change in a way that a citizen of a polluted city cannot<sup>17</sup>.

The suburban setting features prominently in “Quiet Town”. The geographic location of the story is implicit but understood. We deduce that the story is set in a quiet middle-class neighborhood. We also deduce that the neighborhood is not particularly affluent: the floors are linoleum, and the screen door creaks and sticks; moreover, a single parent and child and a retired old woman can afford to live in relative comfort. The houses are uniformly designed, suggesting a planned suburban community. Gurley uses the suburb as a microcosm of the planet, specifically of the global North. What was taken for granted as middle-class utopia is desolate in the face of impending climate change. The normalcy of domestic life is made eerie in the town’s desertion. Bev reminisces about the quiet of the town that was interrupted only by noise of the tennis court and community park. Placidity, the cornerstone of middle-class comfort, was altered to become the very thing that signals a movement away from a comfortable life. The town is quiet still, but it is now quiet in anticipation of its destruction. It is a powerful image. No longer can the affluent drive away from the pollution of cities and seek sanctuary in their planned communities. The symbol of American industry, the suburb, will face its reckoning.

The weather affects the whole planet. It does not restrict itself to smaller, finite units of land. This is, however, an unsuitable setting for an author of fiction to base their story. It is hard to present a global predicament without losing the emotional pull of the local. To limit one’s story to a single community or locality, and to strip that locality of explicit identifiers, is to toe the line between stale objectivity and unscientific subjectivity. Gurley’s “Quiet Town” is the story of any town, chilling for its simultaneous

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15 Baldassare, “Suburban Communities.”

16 Gould and Steil, “Segregation and The Financial Crisis.”

17 Kennedy et al., “Sustainable Consumption and the Importance of Neighbourhood: A Central City/Suburb Comparison.”



familiarity and alienation.

Cities have a different relationship with climate change. Cities are surrounded by their own mythology: productivity, labor, and essential work. Big city life is glorified in film, television, and text. A young professional moves to New York, London, or Tokyo to pursue their dreams. They labor at achieving their goals day and night. When they almost inevitably succeed, for this is fiction, they are rewarded with wealth and recognition. Often with it comes domestic bliss and emotional contentment. The final description of a character may be of them years later, living a wealthy, domestic, and extravagant lifestyle. The city self-mythologizes: if you can make it there, you can make it anywhere. Behind the glamorous fiction of the city is the startling truth. Cities rely on supplying and producing desire. They uphold excessive and unsustainable consumption as a reward for years of backbreaking work. And so, the city perpetuates its purpose, creating the want for a product or practice and then employing people to produce products to sate desire. This self-perpetuating logic of late capitalism is a major contributor to climate change. Though the city itself has not been the center of industrial production in decades, it is still the financial center of business production. Management decisions about production are made in the city. The concrete jungle is where decisions about the climate are made.

Lao Sun of “The Smog Society” is a victim of the city. His memories of himself as a young professional paint a familiar picture. He labors hard to accrue what he believes is expected of him as the breadwinner of the household: “money is important, a house is important, a car is important... everything is important”. He drives to work, buys his wife beauty products, and lives high up in a skyscraper. Nevertheless, he and his wife cannot get away from the “awful weather” that threatens to choke them. Lao Sun is aware of the illnesses induced by weather as “bronchitis, acute emphysema, asthma... and other physical ailments” and “the detachment, the numbness, the estrangement, and the apathy” the fog induces. Despite this knowledge, he cannot bring himself to leave. He is stuck “standing next to the coffin”. He and the city’s other residents are stuck in a vicious cycle: to make their material circumstances better, they inadvertently contribute to the very systems that further worsen their environment. This self-perpetuating cycle is not unlike the self-cannibalizing logic of late capitalism. It is common in major cities across the world.

The smog presented is especially characteristic of China and other developing nations of the Global South to which production is outsourced. Unlike major cities in the West, these cities still handle manufacturing functions. Systems of production and business function converge in these large cities. The result is devastating for places like Beijing, which are clouded with smog. Like Gurley, Chen does not name the exact setting of the story. He instead allows us to infer the setting of the story based on our pre-existing knowledge of urban environments and the characteristics of cities. Our assumptions are based on our knowledge of transnational finance capital: we know what finance capital entails for the environment. Through Lao Sun’s descriptions of skyscrapers and bustling city streets, we can localize but not particularize the intensely global nature of finance capital and the unsustainable production it encourages. The city is local, and smog is a discrete weather phenomenon, but it stands in for global climate concerns and long-term weather decline.

## **Humankind and Family**

Just as weather helps contextualize the larger concerns of climate, so too does the family unit serve as a scale model for humankind in general. It follows, then, that the family is a central concern of both cli-fi short stories. “The Smog Society” is a story of an incomplete family, robbed of a child by the toxic environment of the city. “Quiet Town” tells the tale of a destabilized family deprived of its patriarchal head yet still suffering from his disbelief in climate change. A deeper understanding of atypical family dynamics and the behavior of the family at the end of the world aids our understanding of non-normative human responses to the problem of climate change. Families in these stories serve as a microcosm of the world at large. They are representative of the attitudes of the societies to which they belong. A family is also useful because of its ability to represent a multitude of generations. Through the interactions between, for example, a grandparent and grandchild in conversation about climate change, we may glean a wide array of personal attitudes. Human action across generations has brought on climate change. This is difficult to conceptualize without the family lens to help make comprehensible complex factors such as socioeconomic class, race, and nationality.

How society presents narratives of time helps urge and guide our actions. The way in which we envision the future determines how we act in the present. Both writers create a ‘generational timescape’<sup>18</sup> that consists of ‘the scale of the family’ and ‘the scale of humankind’. The ‘scale of the family’ invites an ‘acceptable’ form of collectivism, one that is acceptable even within our current individualist and capitalist slant. We must preserve the Earth for the care of ‘our’ children and grandchildren. The scale of humankind, however, focuses on a distant future and our moral obligation towards those unnamed masses.

“The Smog Society” does not feature intergenerational conversation. Lao Sun is too busy hustling in the city to invest in domestic concerns. His life plan is conventional: first he must become successful and raise his ranks at his place of employment, and only then, having extracted what he needs from the city, may he raise a family outside of its polluted limits. His wife argues that the smog may suffocate her one day and complains that it already exacerbates her feelings of sadness and isolation. She wants to have a child before her childbearing years are over. Lao Sun rebuts that it would be unfair to bring a child into the world of smog and industrial pollution and that he must work to finance their move elsewhere. This is the trap of the city: he can only leave it through labor, but this labor contributes to the production of more smog. By the time that Lao Sun achieves financial stability however, his wife is old. Their disagreement over childbearing weighs heavily on their marriage until she finally decides to leave him. In his quarrels with his wife, they agree on only one thing: that the smog-ridden city is no place to house a family.

In a stroke of sad irony, the Society’s research report finds that this belief may have backfired on the couple. In their report, they find that the quantity of smog not only affects the moods of the city’s residents, but the moods of the city’s residents contribute to the smog. In areas with happy children and teenagers, the smog is in drastically smaller quantities. Lao Sun’s belief that a child can only be raised in an area outside of the smog-ridden city prevents him from having one which would potentially help to combat the problem. His wife’s insistence on having a child elsewhere is troubled by this report. Had the couple raised a child in the city, they could have combated the smog.

Lao Sun’s attitudes towards family and its place in various environments is telling of a larger attitude pervading the city. He loathes the smog, and he cannot deny its human origin. However, he does not care enough to replace his car for a bicycle until much later in his life, or to relocate to a quiet place in the countryside until he has earned what he needs to in the city. In supporting and working within the industrial system, he enables it to damage the environment. His wife’s despair and depression are rooted in the toxic environment. Lao Sun’s denial of her desire to raise children further exacerbates her unhappiness and ultimately informs her decision to leave him. He puts industry and economics over family and the environment. His failure to respond to environmental concerns directly affects his family. His family will end with him: he has no kin. The working-class city dweller’s future is childless.

In “Quiet Town” Bev’s story is one of multiple tragedies. First, her husband leaves her widowed and in deep self-delusion regarding global climate change. Furthermore, she is left as sole guardian of her young son. In her son, she sees the beginnings of adulthood and images of her late husband, but fears he will not live long enough to see it. As the sole parent and breadwinner in the family, Bev is bereft of the benefits enjoyed by a suburban nuclear family. She is also entrusted with looking after her nosy neighbor, Ezze, who forms a quasi-grandmotherly relationship with Benji. Though their “family” structure is unconventional, it still provides productive moments of intergenerational conversation. Through elderly Ezze, middle-aged Bev, and adolescent Benji, Gurley gives us insight into how three generations respond both differently and collectively to the impending climate crisis. Bev and Gordy’s inability to accept the dangers of climate change suggests the historical moments of the story’s setting. While it is impossible to exactly know when this story is set, we may fairly assume that both grew up in an age when climate change was a topic of debate, instead of a given. The radio broadcast that Bev recalls aired when Benji was a young child. Only five years later, the effects of climate change began to be felt in a manner that refused argument. Benji has lived almost the entirety of his life in a culture that has acknowledged climate change while Ezze was raised in a time before the conversation reached a fever pitch. Bev’s historical position puts her in between both, born into a milieu that debated the validity of climate change, but part of a society that accepts the reality of it during the prime of her adult life.

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18 White, “Climate Change and the Generational Timescape.”



## Generationing

The previous section's description of the stories' "generational timescape" draws upon the theory of "generationing", a term coined by childhood education specialist Leena Alanen. Generationing refers to "the complex set of social processes through which people become (are constructed as) "children" while other people become (are constructed as) "adults""<sup>19,20</sup>. The term borrows from the concept of "gendering" discussed in gender and feminist studies. Akin to the idea that gender construction is less dependent on biological than social custom, generationing divides society into groups that are constructed by social norms rather than explicit scientific designations. Biological markers like puberty or menopause might help inform our designation of elder, adult, and child, but these stages are highly subjective as well as gendered. Pierre Bourdieu, a prominent 20th-century sociologist and public intellectual argued that generational identity is constructed in conflicts over available economic, social and cultural resources<sup>21</sup>. Control of resources and the distribution of those resources is granted to "adults". Generations become demarcated to the political or historical events individuals were born into or grew up in, social tradition and custom, and the level of agency granted to them.

A child is financially, socially, and biologically bound and beholden to an adult. The child can neither cast votes or have a say in climate action. The child is not an economic actor: they can neither make rational decisions as a consumer, nor do they have disposable income independent of a parent or guardian. The child must wait to inherit the Earth, in whatever state their parents and society have left it to them. A child like Benji looks to his mother for final judgement. He trusts her to make the decisions that will benefit him. Her failure to respond to the crisis has consequences that Benji will inherit. Lao Sun responds to the environment by not bringing a child into his smog-ridden and polluted world. He makes the adult decision to not have a child, a decision made with informed rationale. The child cannot be without the will of an adult.

The child may be the emotional center of both stories, but neither story grants the child direct power. They are, by virtue of their age and dependence, beholden to adult caregivers. We may construct the child as one who wields no agency, and the adult as one who is trusted with agency in the child's stead, ostensibly in the child's best interest.

### The Single Mother, The Childless Father: Constructing Family

The opening image of Gurley's "Quiet Town" is unnervingly domestic. Bev, who is focalized by the story's third-person narrator, is interrupted while doing laundry by her neighbor Ezze's visit. She is frustrated by her son's muddy and grass-stained laundry and feels annoyed at Ezze's unannounced visit. Our insight into Bev's trivial concerns and the contemporary suburban description of the town set up the understated tone of the story. The only instances of heightened emotion we are privy to are Bev's memories of days past. Bev's subdued inner psychology indicates that she cannot, or perhaps refuses to, accept the gravity of her situation. Her ability to ignore the calamity of her deserted neighborhood and its steadily increasing water levels lend force to her failure to suppress her memories of her husband. The memory of her past family is strong enough to cut through even her deep self-delusion.

Gurley's vision of the family is a dynamic one that stretches to include non-kin and removes the patriarchal head of the family. "Just me and Benji," Bev reflects but she amends her thought soon after to include Ezze, their neighbor. She adopts the not-quite-welcome but tolerated woman into the family largely out of respect for her age and pity for her loneliness. Bev rarely consciously muses on her late husband, Gordy, and yet his specter haunts the story. She misses him, and she misses "those days", as she thinks of them, characterized by laughter and sunshine. She uses Gordy's death to mark a permanent shift. Before his death, climate change was a contentious topic of argument among pundits, a political talking point, considered even a "farce". The time after Gordy died are days of imminent disaster, of ghost towns, of no room for argument. To Bev, the partition is clear: the times with Gordy are good, and the times without him are bad. Her judgment

19 Alanen, "Childhoods: The Generational Ordering of Social Relations", 41.

20 Smith and Greene, "Key Thinkers in Childhood Studies"

21 Bourdieu and Passeron, "Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture."

is decisive but does not hold firm under questioning. Gordy's death and the ghost of his memory may partition Bev's life, but the process of climate change had been well under way in his lifetime. The artificial partition is in Bev's mind only.

Bev continues to perform domestic duties as if nothing were wrong as the whole neighborhood flees. She bakes cakes, does the laundry, and worries about the state of her linoleum. Though she does finally come to the realization that she "should've had a TV" in the ultimate moments of the story, this conclusion misses the larger point. Bev's deep self-delusion and revisionist understanding of her past are ultimately indicative of the inherent inefficiency of the family lens model. Critics of the model noted it assumes a certain social structure as 'normal' at the exclusion of other groups. Gordy and Bev, however, are members of the privileged 'normal' group. The couple met at college and moved to the suburbs to raise their son. They were, in other words, privileged: they are heterosexual and degree-holding individuals with the financial wherewithal to afford a life in a "quiet" town in the suburbs. The family structure is implicitly patriarchal, hinted at in Gordy's authority about how the family was to interact and respond to the world. Their decision to eschew owning a television in favor of tuning into local radio isolated them from the concerns of the world outside of their immediate environment. Gordy's response to the broadcast warning of the imminent dangers of climate change is skepticism and a fatal lack of action. He falls back on outdated knowledge that he recalls in an uncertain memory: a "brainy lady" had explained "something" about ice cubes and water displacing the same volume of water. Bev, instead of betraying her doubt, comforts herself with his disbelief. They do not feel the urgency of the warning, that fifty years could mean destruction in, at least, Benji's lifetime. They are not moved to action by a sense of intergenerational guardianship. The family link presupposes a "natural chain of obligation" that in effect here is not actually implemented<sup>22</sup>.

Contrary to the assumptions inherent to the family lens, it is not until after Gordy dies that Bev begins to think from a position of concern for her son's future. Her initial response is one of affected apathy, and then, one of deference to old patriarchal structure: she asks herself what Gordy would have done. She dismisses this initial thought with the awareness of his fault and her part in it. Once the water seeps over the walls and trickles under their feet, she is finally unable to ignore the devastation climate change has wrought. The failure of the nuclear family to shoulder the responsibility for a viable environmental future for their children is made more visible to Bev by Gordy's passing. Criticism of the model notes how its assumptions privilege certain groups at the expense of others. Climate change disproportionately affects those with less agency to implement change. These groups end up facing the worst of the consequences. With the knowledge of such criticism, it is unsurprising that those who must live through the most devastating conditions are a young child, an elderly lady, and a single mother.

The family lens model does not account for the non-traditional family structure portrayed in "Quiet Town". Its heterosexual and heteronormative structure results in the erasure of queer and single-parent households. Additionally, it ineffectively employs procreational assumptions. "Do it for the kids" is a useless slogan if the future dies with those kids. It is not enough to want to leave an inhabitable world to one's children; one also desires that those children further procreate and extend their family's bloodline. The end of "Quiet Town" offers no such possibility. The ending is tragic because it offers no biological hope. The final survivors may yet make it out of town, but there are no long-term possibilities of survival. Bev does not have a partner, her elderly neighbor Ezze is well past her child bearing years and has been abandoned by her family, and Benji is still a child. When Bev gazes at Benji the awful realization finally sinks in that he looks "already dead". Gurley offers no cinematic final twist. There is no flash forward to a salvaged Earth or to Bev's future grandkids. Gurley presents no such hope. This nuclear family had failed to heed its responsibility and when that structure was disrupted by Gordy's death an unconventional family unit was instead formed. By the time the family rearranged its structure, it was already too late for them to defend themselves.

At a surface reading, "The Smog Society" is not a story about family at all but rather is about an aging and lonely man named Lao Sun. Ostensibly, the story is about Sun's work for the mysterious non-governmental organization colloquially known as the Smog Society. At its heart, however, the story is about Sun's remorse about the collapse of his family. Like Bev, Sun lost his spouse before the weather events and scientific

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22 Persson and Savulescu.

discoveries of the story. He is haunted by the memories of his partner. Unlike Bev, however, Sun was the man of the household and thus exerted control over his wife and their family in their traditionally patriarchal society. His guilt and regret are more a consequence of his own actions rather than passive Bev's failure to act.

Sun's memories give us an insight into his relationship with his wife and towards a potential family. He describes himself as "happy" in the days spent with his "old wife", and yet the tension between the two is apparent in their stilted dialogue. He is reticent, and refuses to sing for her, and he describes her as "nagging". His refusal to sing for or speak to her stands in for a greater problem that ghosts the story: that of their child. Chen's text does not outright address it. Due to its limited narration through Sun, we are restricted by the psychological limitations he imposes on himself. Despite his hesitancy to actively think about the child that never was, he cannot avoid the memories and guilt that are betrayed in his frequent visits to the daycare. His wife expressed her wish for a child repeatedly but was met with rejection. He denied her request on the basis that they did not have the money to raise a child, nor was the city an ideal location to do so. Despite his wife's warnings that she would not be able to have a child in the five-year timeline that he demanded, he would not budge. In his story we encounter a strange reversal of "Quiet Town": Chen's story offers the alternative to Benji and Bev's. It is the story of the husband and father who has lost his wife and the possibility of a child.

The intergenerational model once again proves its failure to influence change. Sun's family, like Bev's, qualifies for most of the prerequisites demanded by the proponents of the model. Sun and his wife were a young, heterosexual, educated, and middle-class couple. According to sociologist David Morgan, such families are able to approach discussions of climate change in a more nuanced manner than their less educated or socially disadvantaged counterparts. Middle-class morals should enable families such as Sun's to teach "sustainable practices using both ethical and personal accounts"<sup>23</sup>. These discussions around climate change are intended to become a part of family myths or "intergenerational stories that guide action...including practices of care". However, despite their privileged position to enact change, Sun cannot heed the message about sustainability coded into the smog. To raise a child in the "dirty mess" of the city would be "unfair to the kid", Sun had argued to his wife. They would work hard and go somewhere better to "let them grow somewhere nice". In the name of family, instead of teaching good practices, Sun worsens the environment. And so, the nuclear family is a dream left unresolved for Sun and his wife, a dream that hangs over the disbanding of their marriage and his tortured memories of a child that never was.

In his well-intentioned but faulty argument, Sun makes the case for the family in a manner distinct from those who turn to children as personified hope. Instead of putting all his dreams on his child, he instead decided to abstain from bringing a child into the world. This worked against him. The Smog Society's report revealed that not only is there a correlation between the smog density and mental health, but even a positive feedback loop between the two factors. In areas where there was a higher density of children, the report found that coinciding smog and depression levels were both low. In other words, aside from the obvious social damage that it caused him, Sun's decision to not bring a child into the city adversely affected the city's environment and prevented any further chances of the couple successfully beginning a family.

The family model takes for granted that one will make decisions that are mutually beneficial to the environment and the family in the long term. However, we see that to conflate the two is misleading. Sun's actions as a divorcee do not invite reproach. He actively participates in the Smog Society's mission to collect data about the smog in the city, thus doing his part to combat environmental damage. Due to his age, he is retired and not actively working for an industry that pollutes his city. He uses his bicycle as his primary mode of transportation. He lives a simple life. It was his actions in his youth that tarnished the climate. He worked in a corporate industry, drove a car instead of riding the bicycle like he does in the present day, and attempted to maintain a fashionable lifestyle. He bought fashion products for his wife such as cosmetic smog blocking sprays. Instead of working to better the system from the outside as he does in his retirement, his youth was spent in a cycle of labor and consumption. Unlike what the family model would have us expect, it was in relation to his family, not himself as an individual, that he caused most damage to the environment. Potential family man Lao Sun of his youth did less to teach climate best practices than his aged divorcee self of the future.

The adult figures in these stories act in ways that they believe are best for their children. However,

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23 Morgan, "Locating 'Family Practices.'" 174-82

their actions doom the children to an uncertain fate. The couples of the stories rely on patriarchal judgment and capitalist structures to inform their decisions, without considering their heteronormative and short-term assumptions. Parents end up doing more harm than good. This relationship between parent and child has certain implications for the future of the child, both within these stories as well as in terms of the role of the child in cli-fi more generally. Is the child still a figure of hope and promise, or is the child the tragic victim of historical excess and poor decision making?

### **The child in literature**

From Puritan moral tales to the cult of childhood and to contemporary biopolitics, the role of children in literature has greatly varied over time. The child, at different points in history, has been seen as inherently evil, virtuous, and morally neutral. An understanding of historical attitudes towards children and their representation in literature will aid our discussion of the child in cli-fi novels. Understanding how modern conceptions of the child savior came to be will help us reevaluate our treatment of children in “Quiet Town” and “The Smog Society”.

### **Seen, but not heard**

Puritan belief saw childhood as perilous. Fates were predestined, and only a select few were slated for heaven. Under the Puritan belief in a doctrine of individual salvation, the child had to be saved from life and the temptation it offered. The children themselves were not thought to have the autonomy to make moral choices, or the facilities of reflection to repent from sin. Instead, the responsibility lay with their parents to educate them about morality and punish their indiscretions.

The literature of the seventeenth century responded to the Puritan mission. Plots punished naughty children with damnation and material unhappiness and rewarded devout children with futures of a fulfilling afterlife. The literature placed children in grim scenarios that could only be resolved with strong religious values. Those that succeeded in such scenarios were aided by their religion – children were not thought to have interiority or rational ability.

Such thinking persisted well into the Victorian era. Evangelical belief revolved around similar assumptions: that children had to be saved from their own nature, and that the key role of literature was to discipline children. Consequently, child characters in Evangelical literature took on almost trope-like existences. The ‘bad’ child contrasted the ‘good’ child: the bad child forsook his religious teachings for material gain or for the fulfilment of base impulses. The ‘good’ child, on the other hand, avoided despair or temptation and relied on his faith to guide him. The morality of a child was decided before their birth.

### **The cult of childhood**

In the mid-eighteenth century, Rousseau offered a radically different vision of childhood. Though his ideas were not accepted widely until into the twentieth century, they inform what we now believe about childhood and what we perceive the role of the child figure to be in literature. Out of Rousseau’s philosophy came interesting and complex characterizations that embraced childhood rather than suppressing it as a time of sin.

In *Emile (On Education)*<sup>24</sup>, Rousseau rejects the concept of the original sin. Children are not born in sin; they learn it from the world around them, he contended<sup>25</sup>. He instead extolled the wonders of childhood innocence, which he believed was only thus corrupted by their perceptions of and experiences in the world. This dictated Rousseau’s belief that children were inherently good. They lived in a state of wonder and curiosity, more intimate with nature than their adult peers. Children were guardians over nature, vastly different from the simple primordial and impulsive beings that the Puritans had believed them to be. Romantic intellectuals and other like-minded writers embraced this idea. These writers collectively became known as the ‘cult of

24 Rousseau, “*Emile (On Education)*”

25 Grenby, “*The Origins of Children’s Literature.*”



childhood', called so for their preoccupation and glorification of the period of life. With the moral duty of individual salvation lifted, literary explorations of childhood became inventive, abundant, and richer. The works gave young characters an interiority that had previously been neglected by the Puritans and Evangelicals. Children thought, wondered, and perceived the world around them.

Children became a mode of time keeping, and a reminder of a human biological past<sup>26</sup>. Children were likened to early humans. Adults were representative of the "modern" man. The transition between childhood and adulthood thus became a stand-in for human evolution and biological history. This was an early instance of the child being used as a symbol of the past, starkly in relief to the sophisticated and modern adult. Such attitudes are still present in some aspects of cli-fi and its literary criticism.

### **Biopolitics and the child at the end of the world**

In the twentieth century, Freud complicated this new formed childhood interiority further with his work on psychosocial development. He espoused that children mature in stages primarily related to sexual function. The undirected sexual energy of a child, which Freud believed to originate as directionless libido, is reformed into accepted patterns of courtship. In this socialization, the child learns to operate within society; the sexual maturation of the child is coterminous with their social development.

In the mid-twentieth century, the catastrophic war and subsequent shifts in the globe caused anxieties that the Earth had permanently warped form. No longer was nature idyll and static. Man had now caused damage to the Earth so severe that it left no possibility of returning to the tranquility of the past. Mental health and attitudes of the time reflected a deep sense of loss, stress, and aimlessness. Anxieties about the structure of domestic society, and the simple need for patriotic bodies to fight and submit to a nationalist cause, flung childrearing to the fore. Not only were children valuable to the nation in fighting or recuperating from war, they also were key in maintaining legacy and hope for the future. Foucault studied this influence of sociopolitical factors on biology, which he dubbed biopolitics<sup>27</sup>. Foucault defined biopolitics as a field of study at the nexus of biology, politics, and environmental policy. Biopolitics, he claimed, is the process through which the government makes political decisions that affect biological processes en masse. The state advances their biopolitical mission through the enforcement of sexual, social, and gender norms in children.

The state inserts itself into a position of authority over the child by presenting the child as helpless and in need of protecting. The "vulnerable child", defenseless and in need of management, becomes a cipher for the tenuous future. The child of the future needs environmental and social protection now. By passing a certain environmental law, the state may argue, they will be ensuring the safety of future generations. Lee Edelman defines this logic behind the conflation as reproductive futurism<sup>28</sup>, which justifies political thought in the service of the children to come. In his book "No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive", Edelman combines concepts of biopolitics with modern conceptions of childhood to arrive at the term, key to our analysis of the role of children in cli-fi. He states that time is structured by "the all-pervasive figure of the child in need of protection"<sup>29</sup>. The future is marked by the child in peril.

This view has lived on to present day: the kids are the future. We find ourselves in a moment where that future is in peril.

### **"Do it for the children!"**

Climate change is at the forefront of public conversation. Presidential candidates are debating environmental policies, people are marching across the world, and businesses have been urged to consider the protection of the environment. At the forefront of this movement are young activists like Greta Thunberg and Xiye Bastida. The youth has taken up the matter of preservation as a personal cause and has rallied around it.

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Reproductive futurism in the past has framed the discussions around climate change. Its logic is familiar

26 Pollock, "Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500 to 1900."

27 Hughes, "Biopolitics." 22-24

28 Edelman, "No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive."

29 Edelman.



to us: with children lies the responsibility of the future. By protecting the child, we protect the adult to come and safeguard the continued propagation of the human species. The preservation of the future, and thus of the planet, is analogous to the conservation of the youth. In recent history, however, the mission has shifted imperceptibly but crucially. Societal focus is no longer on the child that must be protected from the destruction of the future. We have instead turned to them to save us from that destruction. The child has taken on a new agentive role, taking the slack from adults who seem to be unable to affect change. We expect them to lead rallies and to serve as role models. It is no less presumptuous of an image than that of the child of yore, who was portrayed as inherently sinful or innately angelic.

Edelman is critical of reproductive futurism's investment in the child. The queer critique of contemporary culture's idealization of the child argues that to embrace the child for procreational and biological reasons is heteronormative. Edelman is critical of our dependence on child saviors: are children truly the best voices to make a difference or is this sentimentalization simply a means to cast off responsibility? Edelman is critical of the contemporary turn to 'child saviors' as our protectors in Chen and Gurley's stories. Writing in the context of modern thought, Gurley and Chen hold up children as the last beacon of hope and as the site that preserves thousands of years of human ambition. However, is it fair to put such a burden on Benji and the children of the Sunflower Daycare?

## Benji

Benji is a "good boy". He defers to the judgment of the adults of his life. He turns to his "mama", Bev, as the ultimate authority on most matters. He respects Ezze as his elder and neighbor. He knows what is expected of him: to behave in a manner befitting his age. Even still, in subtle moments of rebellion, he stakes his claim to adulthood. His inheritance as a young adult is individual personhood or a personality defined outside of the child/adult or kid/parent binaries. Benji, Bev admits in a moment of terrified realization, is a child on the verge of adulthood. The beginnings of his transformation surprise Bev, who has been oblivious to the reality of her surroundings. She sees Benji as a young child. And yet, despite her inattention to her son's growth, she still places upon him certain adult responsibilities. These are heavy and born out of the figure of the child savior. Benji is made to shoulder the grim reality of the situation in the face of his mother's denial of it. He must buoy the scared adults around him against currents of despair.

Bev's denial is evident. Benji, on the other hand, reaches a conclusion without prompting: to understand the reality of the world around him, he must observe it firsthand. He ventures outside to observe and understand his situation, and to record how the water rises daily. He does not rely on a TV or radio broadcast to inform his opinion like his parents did. When he concludes that the water level has spilled into the city, he immediately runs home to inform his mother. His first reaction is action, in contrast with his static mother. When his mother sees him, breathless and clearly bearing news, she first notes how muddy his clothes are. Her first instinct is to re-establish domestic normalcy, to clean any muddy marks. Breathless, Benjamin can only get one word out: water. His mother immediately rushes to bring his physical comfort and offer him a glass. In the process she neglects larger implications of the world and its future. Benjamin has the benefit of his temporal position. Having been born into a society accepting of climate change, he is able to see what his mother may question. Despite being able to see the world through uniquely curious and unbiased eyes, he lacks the autonomy to effect change. In his mother's efforts to cater to his immediate needs, she ignores his warning of immediate catastrophe until it is too late. The communication gap between the two is too wide. He can only gasp and try to "just breathe". He is unable to articulate his message in a way that Bev will understand.

Benji has begun to grow into his adult features. His strength surprises her. He holds her hand hard enough to make her "yelp" and look at him with a new understanding. She is surprised to see his eyes: they are not a child's eyes anymore. They are Gordy's eyes, set into his facial structure. She can see "the boy's jawline, his cheekbones, sharpening" into a shape like their father's. She can even predict the process of his aging and hair loss using her knowledge of his father's. Even in a state of deep denial, Bev seems to accept the role of the child as a biohistorical artifact that encodes within him knowledge of biology long past. Within Benji is a traceable lineage and the history of generations of humans. Benjamin is growing into what is promised to him:

his genetic inheritance.

This inheritance is in danger. Like Edelman's child in peril, Benjamin's role is temporary. Childhood is an unsustainable state that the child yearns to graduate from, Benjamin tests the limits of his status by cussing. His mother reprimands him for it, but the repercussions are slim. She can finally see that Benji is growing up. In part, Bev's indecision and static response to her surroundings have played a role in aging Benjamin. He assumes his role as the patriarch of the family far too young, suddenly left to be in charge in the absence of his father. "Mama, we gotta go," he instructs a frozen Bev. Indeed, they must.

Like his real-life counterpart Greta Thunberg, Benjamin is a child who will demand action from the adults. It is unlikely that this child savior will come to the adults' rescue, however. Benji's transformation from child to young man seems futile in his situation. His activism seems doomed to inefficacy: it is too little, too late.

## Lao Sun's Children

Children emblemize hope in modern media. What does childlessness suggest in a story? Lao Sun lives life haunted by the child that never was. His stubborn refusal to procreate, on the grounds of financial and environmental unsuitability, needles his wife. Lao Sun refuses to broach the subject: he remains reticent in the face of her "nagging". She eventually leaves him over her rising despair and their arguments about starting a family. She takes with her the possibility of a child. It is only later, in old age, that Lao Sun regrets his decision. His memories haunt him. The child, who is never explicitly addressed by the story, hangs over the story, motivating Lao Sun's actions and informing his reminiscences.

The family lens is problematic, as previous sections have detailed, for its heteronormative and patriarchal assumptions in the context of climate change. In Lao Sun's memories and desires, the child is male. "He'd have been ten now," Lao Sun tells his distraught wife, in a rare moment of dialogue. Given that it is never clear whether there was a child at all or merely the phantom desire of one, we can reasonably explore the possibility that for Lao Sun, hope is emblemized not just by a child, but by the male child. Lao Sun would pass forward the role of patriarch to a son, and in him find comfort in the propagation of his line.

Unable to let go of his regret, Lao Sun visits the Sunflower Daycare every day on the way home from his volunteer work. Through the glass, he watches the children play. He gazes "hungrily" at the children's "healthy, rosy, bare" faces and loses track of time. The "glasshouse", as the daycare is described, invites such viewing. Its shiny architecture provides a break from the gloomy, smog ridden city. The children are on display. They are sites of unadulterated happiness. In the wake of the report's findings, Sun returns to the daycare decked out in a clown costume. He performs the tricks that at first enamored his wife to him for the children, who delight in his silliness. In these children, he finds "genuine...hope". The story concludes with Lao Sun standing before them against a less smoggy sky. The children's happiness, the result of his clowning, has affected the environment for the better.

Chen's story seems to suggest that the happiness that is 'innate' in young people can increase levels of happiness in adults too. This happiness in turn has a positive effect on the environment. The story suggests a direct relationship between the presence of children and fighting climate change. Not only are children poster figures for environmental action, but also, they are expected to shoulder the responsibility of the future. They are expected to produce happiness in those around them. Lao Sun turns to them for solace both emotionally and environmentally. Lao Sun's "children" serve a purpose: to be seen and to entertain and to produce change. Supposing that an increase in the number of children in an area will reduce levels of smog there due to their cheerful nature is problematic. It not only does it shift the onus of responsibility from adults to children, it also supposes that children are happy much of the time. Not only do these adults expect the child to perform emotional labor to society's general benefit, they also expect these children to eventually procreate to perpetuate such methods.

## Conclusion

Families have long been at the heart of environmental discourse. They center our discussions and serve to

illustrate just how much we have to lose. “But what of your family”, climate activists argue, “do you not care about their future?” Viewers exhale in relief at the close of a disaster film, content in the promise of clasped hands or pregnant bellies. The sun rises and the shot pans out to view the Earth from space. We are reminded of the world the family makes. The family is an acceptable, even ideal, form of collectivity that is sacred to society. No other social structure is treated with the same respect. The exalted standard is not without caveats, of course. It presupposes that the nuclear family in question consists of a married man and woman from the global north, 2.4 kids, a middle-class income and all its comforts.

Adults hold the agency in society. The adult is formed as the ‘not-child’, defined by arbitrary social markers and through the process of ‘generationing’. The adult makes decisions that affect the children of the future. Even still, the adult has gained a curious role in environmental discussion. Adults have turned to children to affect change and rally against the climate crisis. Children are gazed upon or propped up as rhetorical devices but hold little agency themselves. They are expected to speak up against environmental injustice or climate inaction but are not met with the level of regard given to their adult counterparts.

Chen Qiufan’s “The Smog Society” and Jason Gurley’s “Quiet Town” trouble our traditional understanding of intergenerational responsibility and family structures. Gurley’s work features an elderly lady, a young child, and a single mother facing down the consequences of their actions. The image does not codify biological hope in the same way that most popular media depicts survival narratives. There is no hope for procreation. The patriarchal head of the family is dead. His wife is frozen and unable to respond to the peril of her environment. The responsibility falls to her son to shoulder. Chen’s work features the destruction of the family. There is no child or mother. Only the “father” is left. His grief and regret lead him to act as a surrogate to children at the daycare. The children are suggested to solve the problem through their ‘inherent’ cheeriness, without any change of habit by the adults in the city.

Using theory from gender studies, family education, queer studies and environmental science, this essay has sought to open up moments of ambiguity or productive confusion in these works of cli-fi. Why turn to the family? Why present non-traditional family structures? In what ways do the stories conform to conventions of gender, generation, and heteronormativity? Cli-fi, a genre distinct from its more sensational and mainstream cousins, speculative fiction, and dystopian fiction, takes minimal liberties with reality. With real life conversations taking place between children and adults about climate change, and with the definition of the family becoming less rigid, the genre of cli-fi is all too familiar to be classed as speculative. The futures presented in its canon are eerie for being believable.

Cli-fi offers no tidy solutions or easy endings. It opens more questions. What becomes of the child betrayed by his mother’s inability to take responsibility for her inaction? What becomes of the children expected to produce such happiness as to derail a major weather disaster? Gurley and Chen offer little comfort in response to these questions. We are writing the ending to our futures. There will be no miraculous victory, no defeat over the elements, and no sunset salvation. Love and family alone cannot fight the rising oceans and polluted skies.

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