



After the Flood: Environmental Activism, Agency and Action in Sarah Guillory's *Nowhere Better than Here*

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Abstract

Sarah Guillory's 2022 novel *Nowhere Better Than Here* explores how young people can take a proactive role in helping their community to mitigate the effects of ecological damage caused by climate change. The novel tells the story of Jillian Robichaux, whose Louisiana home is threatened by coastal erosion. Upon rescuing a box of old photographs of her town, Jillian is forced to contend with the extent to which her town is now almost unrecognizable due to the constant intrusion of flood waters. Jillian and her friends launch a project to plant marsh grass to counter the creeping erosion. In this way, Guillory balances dystopian aspects with a more optimistic outlook, in exploring the role of child agents in engaging in tangible actions to offset the effects of climate change.

Keywords

agency, story, eco-citizenship, empowerment, home, coastal erosion, floods, Louisiana

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Sarah Guillory's middle-grade novel *Nowhere Better Than Here* (2022) is set in a town on a shrinking bayou—a small inland waterway in coastal Louisiana. Taking place in the aftermath of a flood that has devastated the small town of Boutin, the book explores the practical abilities of young people in countering climate change-wrought destruction. The narrative is told from the perspective of Jillian Robichaux. Part-climate activist and part self-appointed town archivist/oral historian, Jillian becomes custodian of the town's stories saved from "drowning" from the rising waters caused by climate change-driven coastal erosion. A subplot of the novel sees Jillian embarking on a project to plant large swathes of marsh grass in an attempt to mitigate this erosion. "Towns shouldn't shrink like sweaters put through the dryer" (Guillory, 2022, p. 64), Jillian proclaims at the start of the book. The protection of her beloved hometown becomes her driving preoccupation in the text. This article explores the confluence between activism, agency and action in *Nowhere Better Than Here*, specifically through a discussion of how stories have the power to prompt young peoples' environmental action. I hope to also show how children's literature can have a crucial role in building young people's climate literacy more generally, particularly in demonstrating how, as Jillian puts it: "doing something is usually better than doing nothing" (p. 486).

A key consideration in the novel is the extent to which "stories" are compatible with practicality, or "doing". As the narrative progresses, readers move from a view of the protagonist with an interest in her "vanishing town" as something ethereal or "ghost-like" (p. 157), viewed in black and white photos: almost as a bygone artifact. However, this starts to change as the stories Jillian collects from the older residents prompt a more tangible appreciation of the town and what she can do in the present and future to avoid more of her home being claimed by the encroaching tidal waters.

Story itself becomes a kind of balm in the text: "stories have a way of healing broken places" (p. 142), Jillian comments. However, such healing, she understands, also requires action: "In Boutin you learned the value of things, learned to appreciate what you had and fix it when it broke" (p. 103). Still, her role in such a process is not immediately clear. Indeed, the novel considers questions of agency in relation to children's potential contributions to enacting change. Jillian initially questions her presumed *lack* of agency.

I was a child and I'd had enough. Mama and Nonnie had always told me I could do anything, but that wasn't really true. I was only one person—I didn't make this mess (p. 304).

As the novel progresses, Jillian falls under the mentorship of Dr. Nelson: a scientist and coordinator of an environmental NGO tasked with tackling the state's erosion issues. Her sense of empowerment as a climate activist increases. Admittedly, this implies an uneasy power balance wherein the child's agency is essentially "granted" by an adult gatekeeper. Readers can also reflect here on notions of dominion in the Anthropocene more generally, something with which Melinda Benson's seminal *New Materialism: An Ontology for the Anthropocene* (2019) is concerned.

Most natural resource and environmental law is based on two critical ontological assumptions, common to enlightenment based thought. One involves the notion of agency—what it is and who has it. Agency, defined here as the capacity to act, is generally speaking, a capacity presumed to belong only to human beings (p. 252).

Benson's illustration of human dominion over the natural world mirrors adult dominion over children who try to exercise their agency in fighting for greater environmental action. Although adults can encourage this process—as seen in Guillory's novel—youths frequently view adults as a hurdle to be overcome in order to bring about change. This criticism, for example, is central to Greta Thunberg's famous "This Is All Wrong" speech (2019), where she proclaims: "We are in the beginning of a mass

extinction and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth" (n.p). It follows that climate activists like Greta Thunberg and Jillian in *Nowhere Better Than Here* view the Anthropocene as necessarily a time for mobilization, which will ideally be *supported* by adults but need not depend on them.

In *Learning to Die in The Anthropocene* (2015), the climate philosopher Roy Scranton suggests that "[w]e're going to need new ideas, we're going to need new myths and new stories" (p. 20). As mentioned above, part of the way Jillian enacts her agency in the novel is precisely through story. These consist of both the historical oral stories she collects in relation to the vanished parts of Boutin, drowned over the decades due to rising flood water, and to a video montage to be screened at Dr. Nelson's NGO. The montage consists of testimonies from residents describing what makes Boutin their home and therefore worth saving. The material aspects of "home"—both in terms of the built environment and the role of memory in its conception—are important aspects of the text. Crucially too, home and its "in-text" representation are inextricably linked with Jillian's identity.

That wanting was for things not to change at all. I wanted the good parts of Boutin to stay the same, to be perfectly preserved like some insect in amber, a portrait of a way of life that didn't need to disappear. Because, without all those things, I was afraid I had no idea who I was (p. 343).

Jillian's use of the term "preserve" is key here. Cultural critics Hassan and Xie argue that "cultural information embedded in cultural heritage should be preserved" (2019, p. 9). Preserving this cultural information depends on human and structural resilience, the need for which, as Jillian's narrative also suggests, will comprise a crucial part of survival in the Anthropocene. Jillian also views her video project as a necessary form of cultural preservation: "the purpose of videoing these stories is to ensure pieces of Boutin survive" (Guillory, 2022, p. 546). Meanwhile, the project to plant marsh grass is also ongoing. Dr. Nelson's organization, called the Discovery Project, aims to tackle erosion through planting swathes of marsh grass to act as a breakwater. "This acre of grass we're planting," Dr. Nelson explains to her charges, "will grow to two acres by next year, then four the year after that. You are literally rebuilding Louisiana right now"

(p. 465). On one of the planting expeditions, up to her knees in mud in the bayou, Jillian comes to the important realization that, despite her own commitment to reversing the effects of climate change on her locale, ultimately “this would take all of us” (p. 467). The novel strongly makes the case then, for the importance of community action and the potential role of child activists in leading it. Jillian initially recruits her friends. Then, more and more townspeople participate in the actions she describes as “doing, helping, saving” (p. 473). Strong activists have the ability to mobilize communities in taking action, Jillian realizes, but how to reconcile this drive for public participation, with being a child? This challenge that Jillian battles with throughout the novel is a dichotomy that Kata Dozsa explores in her recent volume on *Children as Climate Citizens* (2023).

Through the global actions of the climate movement, the so-called Generation Z has demonstrated political sophistication, access to global knowledges, camaraderie and connection at a global cultural level. However, practice shows that children are rarely associated with traditional civil rights such as freedom of speech, association and assembly. Moreover, participation in matters of public concern has not been to date an express right of children (p. 1).

Dozsa’s book, which considers various strategies for advocacy for children’s rights in climate-based “political fora,” mirrors aspects of Jillian’s own fight to be heard in the novel. For example, Jillian’s use of technology to create an online petition illustrates Dozsa’s argument for the potential power of “digital spaces” (Dozsa, 2023, p. 7). Similarly, in the speech Jillian gives to the adults at Dr. Nelson’s Wetlands Discovery Centre on the importance of doing more to combat the creeping erosion Jillian enacts young peoples’ right to public participation, which right is central to Dozsa’s argument. On finishing her speech, Jillian comments on her new feeling of empowerment from being able to extol the importance of this fight: “In this moment, I didn’t want to be anywhere else. It felt that someone had lit a fire inside my rib cage” (Guillory, 2022, p. 542).

Another word for Jillian’s empowerment is eco-citizenship and *Nowhere Better Than Here* casts Jillian as representing a number of key eco-citizenship values,

behaviors and traits that young people who wish to act as effective actors in the fight against climate change must possess. Extolling the virtues of such traits may be a good entryway into using the text pedagogically, as a stimulus for prompting young people to think more widely about their role(s) in this regard. They include being engaged in the world and a responsible citizen who understands the nature of the fight and what actions they can feasibly take. For example, Jilian blends activism with more practical steps such as the grassroots initiatives. As well as leading her community to take a stand against state underfunding to deal with the fallout of the various environmental crises that have hit Louisiana, from Hurricane Katrina to this most recent storm, Jilian also understands the value of collaboration on a smaller scale, such as when she manages to recruit her (initially disinterested) friends to her cause. Effective eco-citizens should be “empathetic and have a sense of morality by which they can become changers of their environment,” Dozsa writes (p. 20). In the novel, this is interpreted as both empathy with Dr. Nelson and the other climate activists’ cause and from a broader perspective, in terms of Jilian’s realization that “ecology deals with balance—we’re all connected” and that this “connection” is both “human and natural” (p. 200). In disciplinary literacy practice, authentic texts are prized because of their ability to address such traits. Narratives can also help expound on key concepts’ terminology or disciplinary-specific language. For example, through the character of Dr. Nelson, young readers are introduced to concepts such as biodiversity, biosphere, restoration, coastal erosion and others.

At its best, children’s literature can inspire activism, agency and action. It can, as children’s literature critic Amy Cutter-McKenzie puts it, “afford openings for dialogue both with and against dominant cultural texts, images, narratives and figurations of eco-cultural relations” (2014, p. 2). This is, in part, why I think *Nowhere Better Than Here* has profound pertinence. Crucially, Guillory imbues the text with a message of hope that is presented as inter-generational. Boutin is “worth saving” not just because it is home, but also because of what it represents more generally about the fight in which we ultimately all have skin in the game. Jilian demonstrates that young people have the ability to spearhead campaigns and to be role-models not just for other young people, but for adults too, in tackling climate change.

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