Vulnerability and Resilience in Literature of the Anthropocene

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
	This paper investigates how literature written in and about the Anthropocene reflects themes of vulnerability and resilience, with a focus on Indigenous Environmental Literatures and contemporary climate fiction. It traces how human-induced ecological degradation, sociopolitical marginalization, and systemic inequality converge in literary representations that critique dominant narratives and offer imaginative strategies for survival and adaptation. The study examines how vulnerability emerges through intersectional lenses—gender, race, class, and geography—and how resilience manifests not merely as recovery, but as agency, community cohesion, and ethical responsiveness. By engaging with a range of literary texts, theoretical frameworks, and interdisciplinary insights, the paper positions literature as a site for both mourning ecological loss and cultivating hope. It argues that narratives from the Anthropocene generate new ethical imperatives for storytelling, where the writer's responsibility includes representing complex ecological realities and fostering reflective engagement with the precariousness of the human and more-than-human world. Through a synthesis of historical context, theoretical exploration, and case studies, the work underscores the urgent need to understand vulnerability and resilience as co-constitutive forces shaping literary imaginaries in an era of profound

environmental crisis.

In 2010, the proposal emerged that human-induced modifications of the Earth's systems have permeated to such an extent that human activity has fundamentally altered the natural world. This era is labeled the 'Anthropocene' – a novel, distinct geological epoch in which human activity stands as the primary force shaping the Earth's future. The Anthropocene is marked by heightened and unpredictable environmental disruptions and numerous mass extinctions, primarily caused by greenhouse gas emissions. The repercussions of our actions resonate with such intensity that soils are eroding and reshaping underwater landscapes, water patterns are shifting, and rising tides encroach ever nearer. Such extensive transformations also warrant acknowledgment in literature, and a small number of scholars and writers have redirected discussions to advocate for the development of Anthropocene literatures that loudly proclaim the transformative changes reshaping the world. Among the narratives that should be reimagined within these terms are stories that document the subjugation and resilience of those most vulnerable to our exploitation: women and nature. (Storch et al.2022)(Folke et al.2021)

This paper will discuss vulnerability and resilience in the Anthropocene as portrayed in various novels determined as Indigenous Environmental Literatures. Native and other Indigenous peoples living in the Americas and the Pacific Ocean are some of the first to suffer the effects of environmental degradation, yet they are increasingly ignored in social movements to counteract global warming and other ecological crises. Literature that addresses these issues becomes all the more important; stories of vulnerability and resilience are becoming, as I hope to show here, the stories of us all. (Fernández-Llamazares et al.2020)

Geologists propose that the Holocene era - the epoch that facilitated the advent of agriculture and urbanism - is long over. In its stead, a new epoch, the Anthropocene, has commenced. The term marks a new chapter in Earth's history - "the litany of the human effect." The idea of an Anthropocene epoch is a direct result of humans' dominant impact on Earth. Indeed, the moniker expresses the magnitude of anthropogenic (human-caused) climate change, urging researchers to recognize the Anthropocene as a formal biological and geological epoch of the Earth. (Gibbard et al.2022) While the term 'Anthropocene' may point to an early Holocene-like era of human accomplishment, it is rapidly coming into usage to define a period that reveals itself increasingly in terms of its terminal backwardness. From the plateau of 1914-1945 to the turning point of 1945-1989 to the new plateau of 1989-2001, the Anthropocene

emerges as a condition that will have been already full-grown by the time its palindromic nameplate comes into familiar use. If the word catches on, it will owe its ease of pronunciation to the creation of the Anthropocene Workingman's Autohagiography Collective. Whatever duties the word signifies, those in the humanities and the sciences who would be expected to take them on are political activists, indie-science educators, and survivors, and so are fearful of the representation that their own opinions overshadow. Demonstrating disciplinary versatility, the Anthropocene synthesizes a trio of overlapping dimensions necessary for it to designate a new epoch of Earth history in both the geological and theoretical locale. (Batsaki2024)

It is an ongoing priority of literature to encapsulate, question, and explore human experience, struggles and returnings to our best selves. Literature often reflects and communicates the most tried-and-true current concerns of societies, and – as most can willingly acknowledge – one of the most pressing issues of the time is the alteration of our environments in many irrevocable – oftentimes invisible – ways. This is an epochal phenomenon that cannot be avoided, the newness for which has been coined the term "The Anthropocene." In capital-O "Our" Anthropocene, human co-inhabitants are increasingly vulnerable - made fragile and precarious - in the face of an inescapable environmental crisis, one with no manageable solution. Enabled with this ecocritical reading lens, one can study literature as works of composition inviting their readers to witness the onset of this tectonic shift in character and shape the tectonic shift so that readers might prepare and face that transformation. (Lazarus, 2023)

In two literary texts of the 21st century, the characters reside in a postcolonial and/or vulnerably related society and find themselves utterly defenseless against both so near and over there order-quakes. Early into both novels, the fragility of human existence in the Anthropocene suffuses both the lives of the protagonists – each a capable female of teenage age but in separate narrative worlds. The transformative human power of literature lies in its ability to bring new awareness to readers and so potentially move them toward new – as the characters might hold "hope" – graces and "act" after reading to better see, face, evade, or make the possible returnings to selves in our own earthquakes. As in this essay and in both texts, an analysis of victimization together with vulnerability – two narrative aspects shaped by narrative topics of trauma and corroded or lackluster safe havens, and which are re-portrayed qualities of the resilient stance - can lead the reader towards more collocated consideration of the two dueling aspects of "Victim or Resistant?" in the face of socio-environmental crises. (Dalmaso, 2021)

One of the most powerful themes that emerge from literature and other forms of narrative in the context of the Anthropocene has to do with vulnerability – quite the opposite of the sovereign, self-sufficient, invulnerable human ego so beloved by Western techno scientific culture. Vulnerability is about dependence, exposure, and loss, both on an individual and a collective level. Vulnerability in literature can be personal, interpersonal, ecological, social, or political. Characters in literary narratives often find themselves in the midst of social and political contexts that produce vulnerabilities, whether for ecological, economic, historical, or personal reasons. Within a situation of vulnerability, writers and artists sketch the helplessness and anguish of the human experience: the range of emotions from shock and disbelief to anger and determination to heal. After the traumatic event, narratives of resilience – stories of adaptation, persistence, recovery, and recomposition – often take over. Literary narratives from around the world make the case for resilience – not in the sense of an intrinsic human nature, but as an after-the-fact set of stratagems, coping mechanisms, and creative imaginations relevant to individual and social situations. Narratives from within as well as around the vulnerable locus of the text can alternate between self-reflection and representation, individual experimentation, and collective adaptation. These approachable vulnerabilities become layered as each person responds differently, yet relatedly, integrating social and political responses with a sense of ultimately unavoidable vulnerability. So, the adaptation and recovery stage is often about getting on with it. Defining themselves with reference to how they act (in the present and future), characters resist the attempt to write or talk around their vulnerabilities. Instead, they point to their tactical use of that vulnerability as an orientation point and a directive for action. (Gilodi et al., 2024).

The historical context of environmental literature can give us insight into how we got here and where we are going. In premodernity and in medieval times, nature was always vulnerable, even in Eden. Later, Romanticism's focus on the sublime was replaced by an awareness of the environmental degradation brought by the Industrial Revolution. A focus on preservation emerged in response to, and as an extension of, American colonization, paralleling the historical formation of China as a conquered land. Features of anger and guilt combined with the desire for environmental restoration by turn-of-the-century figures. The various reactions to industrial capitalism, war, authoritarianism, and different perspectives on cross-cultural interactions crystallized as irruptions of nature into human cultural systems in writing informed by both earlier and later movements – not just modernist thought in the typically Eurocentric sense, but from within different cultural perspectives that issue from both continuity with, and ambivalence towards, more traditional norms and scholars. (Classen, 2024)

Contemporary literature understands this long history and works primarily with post-Enlightenment, twentieth-century movements such as modernism, postmodernism, and technoculture (and reactions against them) to produce the context through which environmental consciousness can be represented. Some contemporary writers try to reground our respect for, and responses to, the environment in religious or spiritual sources, while others turn away from representational language to convey information about the suffering and permanence of the planet in the face of disaster caused by urbanization, technology, exploitation, and militarism. Each of these approaches to portraying the environment as vulnerable or resilient comes from a deeply entrenched normative perspective. Ultimately, we have to find some way of acknowledging a diversity of values in a field of immanence in order to find meaning in literature and life in the throes of, and despite, the harshness of vulnerability and the failure of resilience. (Mukherjee and Roy, 2023)

As the Anthropocene Working Group has debated the formal designation of the "Anthropocene," scholars have increasingly recognized the extent to which literature has long been concerned with the ecological and environmental issues connected to the name. In a diverse set of texts ranging from seventeenth-century drama to nineteenth-century poetry to mid-twentieth-century science fiction, literature from earlier eras asks questions like those currently debated by eco-critics, environmental ethicists, and climate scientists. It began flourishing before the official inception of the Anthropocene and extends back to the first two decades of the twenty-first century. All the texts, regardless of historical period or genre, gave expression to something glimpsed within a human imagination alert to its surroundings. They presented us with nature; they presented us with human beings and their ways of coping with their ecological circumstances. And they presented us with the intersections of the two: human beings who absorbed from the cultures of their age a sense of their embeddedness in nature as well as the possibility of altering, subduing, or destroying it, and nature that bore traces of human activity no less apt to minister to human welfare than to terrify and destroy. (Cruz and Manata, 2020)

From what lies beyond to what surrounds us—our environment, in short—literature has taken up the theme of vulnerability and resilience across the ages. Naturally, grounds for ethical and moral reflection will differ in hypothetical pre-Anthropocene literature and in narratives more signal-worded as pre-industrial, agrarian, or "pastoral." A wide array of post-medieval literary texts and novel categories goes to work on the confluence or divergence of the human and its environment, exploring among other things the interaction (and potential contradiction) between distinct species or between the human and non-human, the resources and limits of local ecologies, the short-term vs. long-term social consequences of a digression from received customs of husbanding land and livestock, as well as the prudence and

potential sacrifice accompanying deviant decisions concerning the uses of earth, air, and water. These are also themes retained in and adapted by more recent eco-literature. Indeed, the attraction of these themes to our theoretical imagination consists in their having been taken through narrative and lyrical mediations at different points of time and with varying interests, sensibilities, and human conditions in view. Recognizing such expressions as variations of an ongoing, historically mediated discourse underscores simultaneously their particularities of language and situation. At the same time, we are able to trace certain strategies and results and even a set of well-established motifs and narratives concerning ecological crisis and adjustment that proved particularly productive and durable down the centuries. (Tooley et al., 2021)

Vulnerability, as a founding principle of intersectional thinking, designates a positionality at the margins of power that is exposed to heightened precarity during various environmental, social, and political upheavals. It is not a unitary category, but one with manifold determinants. Societal structures allocate differential levels of life risks, and accessing and analyzing these are crucial in order to unpack the causes of human suffering. These include socio-economic status, geographical location, gender, age, or level of disability, and the interactions between them. Extending this thinking, it is often considered that a vulnerability magnifier is built into our minds and our laws. Thus, we often consider some afflictions as counting more than others. (Lesutis, 2021)

Literary texts provide a privileged site to enter into the socio-spatial intersections of poverty, violence, gender, ethnicity, and alien status. Lead characters are particularly apt to bear the palimpsest of determinants, conferring thickness to the characters. The text takes time to define vulnerabilities, to recognize the particular and implied history woven into each vulnerability, and to show how these vulnerabilities constitute lived realities. Social critics and environmental justice scholars alike emphasize that however naturally occurring any climactic event may be, the likelihood and impact of such disaster are influenced by social power differences. Poor, minority, marginalized, or low-income participants are the site and source of unequal exposure to environmental pollution and drastically varied susceptibility to environmental crisis. Going further, the political economy of food production and food deserts, as well as inequalities in health care, cannot be dissociated from issues of vulnerability. (Konar, 2024)

Academic conversations around vulnerability are shifting towards gender and the environment, bringing in a discussion on a "feminist politics of vulnerability." The discussion on environmental vulnerability has traditionally been along Malthusian lines and that feminist ethics of vulnerability have the potential to challenge those discourses. The new community allows the complexity of vulnerable experiences to emerge and is ready and willing to let go of the easy narrative. I have informed everyone

about how easy the prison thing would be for me, because of who I am, because of what I do. And everything is coordinated around me having the easiest time. (Linnér, 2023)

While vulnerability here is the process of system breakdown, the discussion of a breakdown is much more than a scientific, technological, or environmental issue. Just as communities negotiate with erasure, narratives of collapse also intersect race and gender. The environment is always racialized. But the point is that there are no shared narratives; vulnerability is piecemeal. As literary scholars, we can appreciate how literature can and has shown the piecemeal. One of the names of literature, as an art as diverse as being human, is singular experience; the genre of literature, with the highest embrace of the everyday, should be a great teacher on how a person becomes vulnerable. Additionally, intersectional perspectives have already been adapted into academic literary analysis that examines how race and gender shape different reading experiences. In one application, intersectionality opens pathways to examine the pedagogical vulnerabilities of higher education in terms of assessment and feedback as it is connected to race and gender. Moreover, we can also use this section's discussion of resilience in modern and contemporary literature as a way of focusing the various strategies of adaptation used by marginal communities. (Williams, 2021)

When addressing resilience in literature, it may initially be important to consider a number of factors. Fundamentally, for a system – social, ecological, or otherwise – to be resilient means that it is capable of recovering from a shock of some kind. By extension, when faced with environmental and societal challenges in anthropocenic narratives, humans are often doing the same. Resilience, then, is an iterative process that is capable of managing, adapting to, and even overcoming forms of resistance, adversarial climates, and adaptation to new norms. Such a process can therefore be seen as indicative of an agential response subsuming resistance and transformation. (Shamsuddin, 2020)

In conceptualizing resilience, one can refer to a range of factors. Entities are more likely to be resilient if they have a sense of efficacy in their surroundings, strong networks and access to support, ready physical resources, and a strong sense of community. In considering fictional literatures of resilience in the face of what is environmentally poor or climactically catastrophic, a narrative of success often includes characters that show resilience. They manage to maintain themselves and find a psychological balance and, frequently, a newfound moral orientation. The portrayal of resilient characters and resilient communities has been amply studied for the sake of audiences' role as bearers of survival qualities. Narratives of resilience do indeed abound. However, one must approach the popular narrative of the resilient individual or body of society within wider literary contexts. (Sharma and Rautela2022)

In contemporary responses to global environmental threats, one of the most prevalent representations of resilience in literature is through the collective activity of communities seeking to recover and rejuvenate in the face of adversity. Narratives present communities attempting to mobilize their resources so they can continue as collective entities, with a narrative focus on their actual or figurative survival. There are strong parallels between the resilience assets of communities in these texts and those deployed by actual communities in the world. In representing both fictional and real social groups, community resilience is related to already existing modes of sociality and communal engagement, sociocultural resources, and human and community strengths. Another influential resilience asset is the importance of social bonds and social networks: individuals forge relations with others to develop and enact strategies that can contribute to their own and others' security. (Cavaye and Ross, 2022)

This literature emphasizes the significance of cultural narratives that convey a sense of belonging, continuity, and optimism. It underscores the idea that adaptation and survival are achievable in the face of changing circumstances. Resilient culture is portrayed as a collection of stories, myths, and shared experiences that shape national and global social imaginaries. It is crucial that cultural narratives envision a hopeful future, promoting a positive outlook on social adaptability and longevity. In the Anthropocene era, there is growing emphasis on the role of individuals or dispersed groups as collective subjects with the ability to exert collective influence. Additionally, there is a focus on the mechanisms prioritized for the remediation of literal and representational worlds. (Samuel and Thompson, 2021)

Environmental fiction, often known as 'eco-fi,' is a relatively contemporary genre of fiction. These narratives depict fanciful stories set in potential present or future scenarios shaped by environmental changes. In these accounts, the focus often lies on catastrophe, environmental breakdown, or, conversely, resilience and adaptation in adversity and difficulty. The sub-genres of eco-fi are as diverse as the multitude of authors creating it and encompass categories from dystopian, supernatural, and science fiction to speculative, magical realism, and near-future stories. Just as the genre is extensive, the environmental concerns being tackled are equally wide-ranging, including deforestation, plastic contamination, endangered species, protected habitats, climate, migration, and livelihoods and displaced residences. Furthermore, many of the writers are scientists or journalists who are active participants in local field or investigative work and possess firsthand knowledge about the subjects addressed in their fiction. (Mackenthun, 2021)

Woman on the Edge of Time was published in 1976, often seen as the book that kicked off the modern exploration of this field. Among notable contemporary cli-fi authors is Leanna Petronella,

author of the climate-related novel in stories The Imagined End. Petronella's ability to create the world anew within each chapter demonstrates not only a mastery of the sub-genre through the implorations of more fantastical and science fiction-oriented styles but also in the variations on time heightened by migratory characters. One of the most significant reasons for reading climate fiction is, in part, 'to prime imagination for the possibility of a worst-case scenario being realized if we continue on our current path.' As such, cli-fi is a testament to the fragility and tenacity of human lives, enacted on and within changing environments. It is a 'barometer of social and scientific concerns' that allows readers to see, with their own eyes, the many possible paths branching forward from immediacy. Just as our own lives are a stepping stone between countless calamity and spectacular joy, these narratives bridge the gap between fictions too beautiful to believe and their urgency to be experienced. Their goal is in their offering to climate to 'poke people...into really thinking.' As such, the grief and possible hope of these works are inseparable, carrying us readers forward by pushing us deeper into known tears. This, too, is one of the fundamental drives of Living Maps: Stories of Change. A cli-fi and ecofeminist coalition, those who felt called to write this anthology collectively and resoundingly answered the knock of speculative urgency. The tales embedded within these pages are not only imagined but vital. In writing them, we enact the need to recognize the ecological systems at the core of human living and to mourn them even as they simultaneously carry value out over an expanse of reserves. In reading our production and immersing yourself in the varied tenors of these offerings, our wish is that they will continue to excite and provoke. (Rich, 2021)(King, 2022)

Many writers, artists, scholars, and researchers claim that it is the writer's role to raise awareness and articulate issues of vulnerability and resilience in different forms and genres. In doing so, they sketch out scenarios: "what if"? Consequently, they anticipate future developments in literary proposals and, at the same time, work with elements of the socio-political present. Various authors focus on individuals or collective confrontations, especially on marginalized communities in connection with the modification of the environment, but they deal with the theme of resilience rather than vulnerability. They understand it as an active approach and a dedicated response to crises, by which it is easier to overcome climate change than by preventing it. (Lengelle, 2021) Ecocritical scholarship in literature is confronted with the ethical dilemmas of representing the victims of climate change. Writers engage the potential of speculation by questioning the current and actual dimensions of human activities and their consequences. They try to present a story that is the closest to a possible course of events in which the reader or tourist stands on the horizon, exploring these possible spaces. The role of both the writer and the reader or audience is to implement an appropriate response or action. Thus, by asking and inspiring

the reader to action, writers are constructing a new identity for an empathic reader. The readers of environmental literature also face a personal and ethical problem: that is the question of responsibility for the ecological impacts of their decisions. (Dunne and Raby, 2024)

The narrating of experiences of communities facing multiple vulnerabilities potentially triggers critical and ethical questions. As humans, are we allowed to tell other people's stories of vulnerability? What are the moral—including epistemic—responsibilities of those who are narrating others' stories of adversities or vulnerabilities? Discussing the narrating of others' vulnerabilities or communities' resilience seems even more pressing in narratives produced during the Anthropocene, especially when exploring themes of increasing social inequalities and environmental risks. Many writers and artists are turning the palettes of their creativity to portray the 'ecological wounds' imprinted upon vulnerable human bodies, questioning the ethics of documenting the catastrophic realities of these lives. More than a handful of anthologies boast powerful accounts of the structural oppressions that exacerbate human and nonhuman suffering during this era of environmental turmoil. Nature writing and eco-philosophy—including producer-to-consumer mediated forms of these writings—are seeing a marked increase in representations that acknowledge multiplicity, difference, and hybridity. (Seidel, 2024)

The representation of vulnerability has the potential to be critiqued on at least two general grounds. On the one hand, any artist could potentially be considered to be exploitative when representing stories of multiple forms of precarity; on the other hand, they may be representing it in such a way that unduly reclaims an already disempowered voice. Another major ethical question to consider is one of cultural appropriation, or the power that the writer or artist implicitly wields over the narrative. What must be acknowledged in any publication or representations of these stories is the very human power relations that are created in telling another person's vulnerable story. Meditating on these questions may end up discouraging writers from taking risks in telling stories that could make a positive impact on the reading world, as they may feel it is impossible to get the portrayal of their own or others' vulnerability 'right'. On the flip side of this, for the committed writer of such narratives, it will encourage deep reflection on why. For whom these stories are to be told and what is intended to be achieved by conveying the message? In this section, we consider some of the writers who have attempted to approach writing on vulnerability with such reflexivity, the challenges they face, and their intentions. For instance, a non-Indigenous writer living in the tundra of the Alaskan Arctic, tries to approach whiteness, ability, and the stories white people can and can't tell in today's literary context as the 'challenge that will make her grow as a writer.' She asks, 'how do we have standing in a story in which we have been complicit, as victims and certainly as perpetrators?' Several other writers introduce

their work on vulnerability and abuse, saying, in effect, this is my story, no one else's. (Abebe et al.2021)

The importance of various forms of vulnerability and numerous strategies of resilience demonstrates just how central these two concepts are to the Anthropocene, but also to the imaginaries and literatures of the Anthropocene. While the pressures and worries of environmental pronouncements and reports are often seen as something that literature resists or transcends, a strong case can be made that these narratives are more deeply enmeshed - perhaps even at a genetic or conceptual level - than anyone has seriously considered. The evidence of pressing and imaginative linkages suggests that literary works of a political provenance are essential to contemporary society, enabling readers to think carefully and imaginatively, and to develop a critical awareness, if not always affective engagement, with the problems of ecological precarity in multiple wastelands. (Khodjamkulov et al.2020)

Although we hope to have charted a number of productive ways forward in exploring a single conceptual map of vulnerability and resilience in the literatures of the Anthropocene, we have also noticed a number of blank spots where we encourage future scholars to explore. In particular, unlike the idea of 'despair' that has been pushed as a productive mode of response, our essays show a lack of responses to the 'unbearable' demands of the Anthropocene that forms a generative and potentially restorative process. In other words, we invite future scholars to explore the productive candor of grieving for someone and something lost in ecological landscapes of concern that saturate literary production – and, of course, we invite and encourage writings that, without losing sight of the ethical demands of the present, focus more thoroughly on the racial and intersectional implications of 'wasting', decay, ecological precarity, and resilience. In sum, therefore, we reaffirm the emerging collective consensus that literature is a powerful and necessary tool in understanding the concept of the Anthropocene in all its multiple aspects. It is also evident that the literatures of the Anthropocene are diverse and evolving, and it is an exciting task to watch, and to keep watching, and to keep exploring, in all the forms it takes. (Münster, 2020)

Margulis and Orme suggest that the literary production of the Anthropocene has begun to shift, the former arguing that ecophobia is becoming much less prevalent in the literature of the past ten years and the latter contending that the most compelling works about 'big issues' are those that relieve themselves of teleology and simply witness and document change. Milstein has identified what he calls the new eco natures in Anglo writing, which are landscapes of conflict, a conceit that would appeal in particular to the forceful address of the emerging role of eco-criticism as a strategic defense system for human beings living in a world that has been damaged, in part for their benefit. (Münster, 2020)

The zeitgeist is dominated by the individualism and personal action of late capitalist lifestyle narratives and the twin environmental anxieties of our time—climate change and extinction. Recently published synthesis works in the field of literary climate change scholarship map the expansive fields of works addressing characters' ecophysiological exchanges with climate change and stories that foreground defense of the biosphere. A rising curiosity with the environment, landscape, locality, and locations of the Anthropo is met quatrainally in works such as core performance project Where to? and the optic turn of the collection Dancing with Ghosts and Other Timescapes of the African Occident, Meadow and Orient. Ongoing projects to continue tracking the musicoscapes and even bibliographies of the Anthropo suggest that this is very much still a literary moment. The signing off of Anthropocene studies buoyantly predicts an eco-resistive takeover of all scholarship even as it negotiates the field's turn from humanities-led to environmental science-overseen research. (Donnarumma, 2020)

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