

Seeds of Latent Hope: The Figurative Entwinement of Children, Adolescents, and Plants in Maja Lunde's *The Dream of a Tree*

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Abstract

Drawing on theorizations and previous studies of climate fiction, perspectives from critical plant studies, and discussions on the mythical and symbolic role of trees and seeds, this study traces figurative relationships between plants and the child- and adolescent characters in Maja Lunde's latest climate fiction, *The Dream of a Tree* (*Drømmen om et tre*, 2022). The novel is the last volume in Lunde's "climate quartet", where she, for the first time in her series, employs a young adult protagonist. The plot revolves around a group of children, stranded on the archipelago of Svalbard that hosts the global seed vault. The study aims to show how the child and adolescent characters in Lunde's climate fiction are embedded in figurative patterns associating them with growth and hope in ways that serve to move Lunde's climate quartet from a dystopian towards a more utopian resolution.

Keywords: Critical plant studies, climate fiction, Maja Lunde, children's and young adult literature, utopia, dystopia.

Resumen

Recurriendo a teorizaciones y estudios previos sobre ficción climática, a perspectivas de estudios críticos de las plantas, y a debates sobre el papel mítico y simbólico de los árboles y las semillas, este estudio traza las relaciones figurativas entre plantas y los personajes infantiles y adolescentes en la ficción climática más reciente de Maja Lunde, *The Dream of a Tree* (*Drømmen om et tre*, 2022). La novela es el último volumen del "cuarteto climático" de Lunde, en la que, por primera vez, la autora utiliza un protagonista adolescente. El argumento gira en torno a un grupo de niños varados en el archipiélago de Svalbard que acoge el banco mundial de semillas. Este estudio pretende mostrar cómo los personajes infantiles y adolescentes en la ficción climática de Lunde están incrustados en patrones figurativos que los asocian con crecimiento y esperanza de formas que sirven para trasladar el cuarteto climático de Lunde de una resolución distópica a una más utópica.

Palabras clave: Estudios críticos de plantas, ficción climática, Maja Lunde, literatura infantil y juvenil, utopía, distopía.

Introduction

This study explores figurative relationships between plants and child and adolescent characters in Maja Lunde's latest climate fiction, *The Dream of a Tree* (*Drømmen om et tre*, 2022).¹ Lunde gained an international readership with *The*

¹ The quotes and page references in this article refers to the original Norwegian edition and all translations are mine.

History of Bees (2015), which was the first novel in her “climate quartet”, revolving around colony collapse disorder (CCC). In her subsequent works, Lunde highlights human consequences of drought (*The End of the Ocean / Blå*, 2017), and species conservation efforts (*The Last Wild Horses / Przewalski's hest*, 2019). The quartet's final volume, *The Dream of a Tree*, turns to plants, with a plot that centers on the importance of seeds for global food security. *The Dream of a Tree* narratively connects with *The History of Bees* by featuring one of the main characters from the quartet's first volume, Tao. While Tao lives in the narrative future in *The History of Bees*, she appears in the narrative present in *The Dream of a Tree*. For reasons of both scope and relevance, this article is focused on analyzing the figurative interrelationship between plants and child and adolescent characters in *The Dream of a Tree*.

Drawing on cognitive narratology, Roberta Seelinger Trites has discussed how metaphors of embodied growth abound in adolescent fiction, citing for instance Georg Bernhard Tennyson's use of plant cultivation as one such metaphor of adolescent growth (“Growth” 6). While her climate quartet primarily is advertised for adult readers, it is notable that Lunde for the first time chooses an adolescent protagonist as her main focalizer in *The Dream of a Tree*, which thematizes human-plant relationships. Thus, Lunde leans on a common mapping metaphor linking plants and adolescent growth.

In a discussion of how to define young adult literature, Svein Slettan notes that young adult literature comprises diverse works in various genres and tends to be written with an age-specific audience in mind (1). Problematizing this delimitation by age, Slettan proposes a more inclusive definition of young adult literature as literature that “deals with young adults, is suitable for young adults, or is read by young adults” (2; my translation, emphasis in original). Following such a broad definition, *The Dream of a Tree* may be classed as young adult literature, since it centers on the life of the adolescent Tommy.

In the previous volumes of the climate quartet, Lunde works with three main layers of narrative time, placing her characters along a chronological continuum of past, present, and future, where they are linked by a common interest in the novels' main topic. Thus, she orchestrates the reader's participation in events that exceed a human life span, approaching what Antonia Mehnert, with reference to Barbara Adam (55), terms “environmental time” (Mehnert 95). In *The Dream of a Tree*, the narrative present of the eighteen-year-old protagonist Tommy is in the reader's future, in 2110. Following a pandemic that wipes out the adult population of Spitzbergen, Tommy survives with fellow adolescent Rakel, his two younger brothers Henry and Hilmar, and Rakel's younger sister Runa. The narrative past is gradually revealed through Tommy's internally focalized memories, through character dialogue, and by aid of third person narration, detailing Tommy's coming of age and his research into the life of Russian biologist Nikolai Vavilov, who established the world's first seed bank in the 1920s. At the novel's end, Tommy finds himself isolated in Spitzbergen, the lone custodian of the global seed vault, as Rachel dies and the younger children are shipped to China by Tao and a Chinese research team, who travels to Svalbard with the aim of appropriating the seeds from the vault. Tommy's preoccupation with Vavilov's life helps further the significance of seed conservation as a cross-generational effort.

Tracing figurative relationships between plants and the child- and adolescent characters in *The Dream of a Tree* and discussing them in relation to patterns of utopian and dystopian writing for children and young adults, this study asks what roles seeds, plants, and plant metaphors play in Lunde's vision of the future, how they are linked to children and adolescents and how such connections serve the overall narrative resolution in the last instalment of Lunde's cli-fi quartet. Before embarking on a close reading and analysis of plant-human interrelationships in *The Dream of a Tree*, the next two subchapters outline theoretical perspectives from previous studies of climate fiction, critical plant studies, and children's literature studies that are useful to the analysis. I also briefly touch on metaphor theory, aspects of tree and seed symbolism, and on seed biology, before moving on to the analysis.

Climate Fiction, Critical Plant Studies, and Utopian Literature: Tropes and Analytical Perspectives

Climate fictions (cli-fi) are attempts to envision and communicate in novelistic form the impact, especially on human individuals, of the large-scale environmental shifts set in motion by anthropogenic climate change. Rooted in the wider field of ecocriticism, Adam Trexler's *Anthropocene fictions: the novel in a time of climate change* was a forerunner in the theorization of the genre, providing the first, book-length study. In it, Trexler is concerned with how cli-fi handles the merger of scientific fact with novelistic form in literary depictions of climate change. Inspired by Bruno Latour's discussions of the social, scientific, and cultural dimensions of scientific knowledge production, Trexler asks: "If facts are both real and fabricated, what is the status of scientific truth in a literary text, itself fiction?" (58). Having examined a diverse corpus of Anglo-American climate fiction, from the 1970s to the early 2010s, Trexler identifies several novelistic strategies commonly deployed in literary representations of climate change that serve as means to merge scientific fact with literary fiction, such as including a scientist in the plot (31) and dumping scientific information in dialogues or reports. In *The Dream of a Tree*, the scientist is dead (Vavilov), but functions as a repository of scientific information available to Tommy through library books.

Another common approach in cli-fi is to embed scientific predictions in the novel's setting. As noted by Caren Irr, "endangered cities, islands and remote Arctic regions" are common locations in cli-fi (2). *The Dream of a Tree*, which is mainly set on the arctic Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard, conforms to this geographic predilection. Common cli-fi settings tend to combine with certain tropes of spatial transformation deployed to signal climate change. As Trexler notes: "Although there are hundreds of climate change novels, only a handful of transformations cover the vast majority of them: direct heat, catastrophic storms, arctic switches, and floods" (78). Interestingly, none of these are immediately relevant in *The Dream of a Tree*, which is set in a future globally marked by the effects of climate change, signaled not least by species loss.

In *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel*, Johns-Putra points to a recurring rhetorical figure of calling on the love of parents for their children, to bring home the importance of climate action, epitomized in the saying: "We have not

inherited the Earth from our fathers; we are borrowing it from our children” (Johns-Putra 1). As Johns-Putra notes: “This parental rhetoric of posterity is possibly one of the most prevalent tactics in contemporary environmentalist discourse” (4) and this holds true for cli-fi as well. However, Johns-Putra finds that climate fiction “does not simply use the child as a convenient signifier for the future; it just as often actively interrogates this symbolic use of the child and the norms it calls forth” (7). As is discussed in the analysis below, such questioning also takes place in *The Dream of a Tree*, to some degree.

With its emphasis on examining the figurative entwinement of children, adolescents, and plants in a work of climate fiction, this article aims to contribute both to studies of cli-fi and to critical plant studies. Critical plant studies is a cross-disciplinary research field within environmental humanities, comprising biologists, who argue that plants display signs of intelligence (Trewavas; Mancuso and Viola; Gagliano), philosophers, reflecting on the (neglected) role of plants in Western philosophy (Hall; Nealon; Irigaray and Marder) and art and literature scholars examining the presence and representation of plants in cultural expressions (Vieira; Ryan). Various analyses framed by critical plant studies point to a discrepancy between the biological significance of plants and their cultural role in (modern, Western) societies. A notable lack of attention towards plants tends to be explained with reference to Aristotle’s *scala natura*, in which plants feature near the bottom of the value hierarchy, and to Genesis, where plants are created before “every living thing” (see Gen. 1.11 and 1.21). Biologists J. H. Wandersee and E. E. Schuster have disclosed a tendency to disregard, and be ignorant of, plants in the environment that they have dubbed *plant blindness*. Following theoretical developments within critical plant studies, Kathryn M. Parsley has proposed substituting the disability metaphor of “plant blindness” with the term *plant awareness disparity*, a suggestion I adopt here.

Wandersee and R. E. Clary speculate that plant awareness disparity is a human perceptual “default” position since plants do not usually pose an immediate threat to human life. In contrast, Matthew Hall has argued that our tendency to focus on, and value, animals over plants, is “largely a cultural-philosophical attitude” (6), founded in a zoo-centric cultural orientation. Hall bases this argument on examination of cultural attitudes towards plants across various metaphysical systems worldwide. The identification of plant awareness disparity as a cultural bias is supported by a recent review study, concluding that diminished nature experience is a likely cause, since plant awareness disparity has predominantly been identified among “urban populations in high-income countries” (Stagg and Dillon 588).

While there are previous studies of Lunde’s climate quartet (Furuseth; Whittle), none of them have so far focused on the role of plants in Lunde’s fiction. Within children’s literature studies, approaches to cli-fi for young adults have predominantly been part of a wider discussion of dystopian and post-apocalyptic trends, prominent in children’s and young adult fiction since the 2000s (see Hintz and Ostry; Bradford et al.; Basu et al.; Day et al.) and such perspectives remain relevant here. Studies combining perspectives from cli-fi with analytical attention to plants are further between (but see Guanio-Uluru “Climate”; Colligs; Spencer, and Rusvai).

Reflective of a cultural-philosophical tendency to ignore plants, Monica Gagliano, John Charles Ryan, and Patricia Vieira have found that “poetry and prose in the Western tradition” tend to represent plants as “the correlatives of human emotions” and as “reflecting human states of mind” (x), that is: Plants tend to function metaphorically in literary texts, rather than be represented *as* plants. This tendency is evident also in climate fiction for young adults. Analysis of plant representation in Nordic young adult climate fiction revealed that plants most prominently served metaphorically as keepers of memory and truth, in the form of paper, books and written documents—objects that were emphasized over and above living plants (Guanio-Uluru, “Imagining”). The fictional roles of plants thus had poor correspondence with the real-life significance of plants to biological life and the global climate.

The trope of (dead) plants as record keepers also occurs in *The Dream of a Tree*, where Tommy frequents a library. At the same time, attention towards real plants and the biological significance of plants is signaled in that Tommy’s grandmother runs a greenhouse, in which she lectures Tommy in plant care, and in the use of the global seed vault as a significant plot motivator and motif. In a dystopic future, the vault is left in care of the protagonist, who grows to identify with the world’s first seed-banker, Vavilov. The “sources of inspiration”, list in the appendix of Lunde’s novel, shows that she has engaged with texts from critical plant studies (Jahren; Lauritzen; Mancuso and Viola). A phytocentric (plant-centered) analysis of *The Dream of a Tree* is thus highly pertinent.

While Lunde’s climate quartet may be read as part of a wider dystopian trend, *The Dream of a Tree* also incorporates traits typical of utopian writing for children and young adults. Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry point out that in utopian writing for a young audience, children and young adults are generally the center of concern, “sometimes even bearing the major responsibility for the formation, survival, or reform of the society” (1). This indeed is the situation for the child and young adult characters in *The Dream of a Tree*, as the adult population of Svalbard dies off. In the following, I aim to show how Lunde, in the final instalment of her climate quartet, draws on literary patterns and metaphors associated with child and adolescent characters to shift her writing on climate change in a more utopian direction—a shift accomplished not least by aid of metaphorical figures and mythological allusions linking people and plants.

In the next section, I briefly clarify the term metaphor, introduce key perspectives on tree mythology and seed symbolism, and present biological information about seeds and seed vaults that are relevant to the analysis of *The Dream of a Tree*.

Plants: Metaphors, Mythology, Biology

Discussing embodied growth metaphors commonly employed by critics of young adult literature and the Bildungsroman, Trites calls attention to figures such as the comparison of maturation to a journey (leaving childhood behind), to sculpture

and art (shaping and formation), and to horticulture (cultivation and growth) ("Growth" 65-66). She further notes that female maturation is often metaphorically described with reference to confinement (enclosed, imprisoned), constraint (bondage, pressure), and (sexual) awakening that metaphorically "map embodiment on to the concept of psychological growth" (66).

Trites' discussion of metaphors of embodied growth in young adult fiction most closely aligns with what M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, in their overview of metaphor theory, term *the cognitive view*. The cognitive view argues that metaphor deeply structures our thoughts and perceptions, aiding our mapping across conceptual domains (Abrams and Harpham 189-190). Citing several metaphors so common that "we use them without noticing them", he highlights "People are Plants" as one example of such cognitive mapping metaphors underlying numerous everyday expressions like "She's a late bloomer" and "He's withering fast" (191). Metaphorical associations between people and plants are of particular relevance here.

Noting how metaphor theory has developed into quite a complex field, Abrams and Harpham observe that, following centuries of discussion, "there is no general agreement regarding how metaphors are identified or understood" (189). Taking a historical perspective, they outline four influential theories, where the cognitive view is the most recent (189-193): An earlier view, *the similarity view* considers metaphor a departure from standard language use, taking the form of an elliptical simile that implicitly compares two disparate things to stylistic effect, while *the interaction view*, argues that metaphor permeates all language and reframes our view of the subject (*tenor*) to which the metaphorical associations are applied. Finally, *the pragmatic view* holds that metaphors "mean what the words, in their most literal interpretations mean" and serves the pragmatic function of calling our attention to aspects of a thing that we would otherwise overlook (193).

In a discussion of the narrative functions of metaphor, Gerard Steen seems to discount the pragmatic view when he holds that metaphor "is based in a non-literal analogical relation between two concepts or conceptual domains" (305). He notes that metaphor may play distinct narrative roles as a) a deliberate figure of speech on the part of a narrator or character, serving a stylistic role in the narration (the similarity view); as b) a conventional figure of speech forming part of everyday language use (the cognitive view); and as c) "a mode of narration" serving a structural role in a narrative—his example here is the structural metaphorical relationship between James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Homer's *Odyssey* (Steen, 305-306).

Accepting the cognitive view, which highlights how metaphors are part of everyday language use, one may consider *how* common mapping metaphors become embedded in everyday language. In the case of the metaphor "people are plants" one may speculate that it has something to do with Aristotle's influential description of growth as the foremost *psuche* or "defining activity" of plants (Fossheim 49). According to Aristotle, the plant's ability for growth is shared by both animals and humans. Thus, in this sense, people are "like plants"—a view so culturally influential

it has become embedded in conventional language. Cognitive metaphors thus signal a certain outlook or world view.

The roots of “people are plants” as a mapping metaphor presumably dates from pre-Christian times. Myth theorist James Frazer notes that tree worship once was common with many pre-Christian European peoples (83) and while the tendency to think of plants as family or “kin” is evident in several indigenous traditions (Hall), it was also common in European pagan traditions, not least in Old Norse mythology. According to Old Norse myth, as recorded by Snorri Sturluson in *The Prose Edda*, the first humans were created by the sons of Bor (one of which was Odin), who fashioned them from an ash and an elm, giving them “breath and life, intelligence, movement, speech, sight, and hearing. (...) From them came mankind and they were given a home behind Midgard’s wall” (18).

The notion in Old Norse myth of “tree as ancestor” was further strengthened since trees were revered as sacred sites and the Yggdrasil Ash was considered the *axis mundi*, uniting nine disparate realms. In Scandinavia, traces of tree worship are still visible in the rural landscape, in the form of giant trees (“tuntrær”) located near old farmhouses (Hulmes). It is not incidental, then, that *The Dream of a Tree* opens with an allusion to the creation story of Old Norse myth, foregrounding, from the very outset, the idea that “people are (kin to) plants”.

When common metaphors are read as expressions of mythological world views, their associative range extends towards the symbolic. In literature, a symbol is an object or event that “signifies something, or suggests a range of reference, beyond itself” (Abrams and Harpham 358). Abrams distinguishes between *conventional symbols*, the associative range of which are determined by cultural context, and *personal symbols* that may also be conventional but develop a further associative range within the oeuvre of a particular writer (357-358).

In Old Norse myth, trees—and particularly the ash and elm, symbolize human genesis and ancestry and connote, through their relationship to the “first humans”, birth, progeny, and fertility. As Michael Ferber points out, the connotations of individual trees in literature usually are quite species specific—but anything that “can grow, ‘flourish’, bear ‘fruit’ and die might be likened to a tree,” including, “a person, a family, a nation, [or] a cultural tradition” (219). To Norwegians, the ash is a conventional literary symbol, drawing its associative range from famous passages in the *Elder Edda*, which are invoked in the opening scene in *The Dream of a Tree*, when the orphaned Tommy finds a large ash washed up on the beach.

Like trees, seeds are significant in *The Dream of a Tree*, both in the form of the actual seeds in the Svalbard global seed vault and as metaphors for hope and potential growth. While the seed is a cross-cultural symbol for new beginnings, as a conventional symbol its associative range varies with cultural context. In the Bible, “seed” connotes “offspring” or “progeny”, whereas in classical literature it tends to mean “race”, “lineage”, or “germ”, “spark” or “element” (Ferber 184-185). In *The Dream of a Tree*, seeds connote both “offspring”, “progeny”, “lineage” and “germ”, as will become clear. Ferber refers to Socrates’ metaphor of seed dispersal for “the

sowing of knowledge”, which is also found in the Biblical Parable of the Sower, and in the word “seminar”, denoting a place where “a student’s mind is implanted with seeds of knowledge” (185). The “seeds of knowledge” Lunde hopes to implant in the reader of her climate quartet is not least an understanding of climate change effects. *The Dream of a Tree* is in this sense a form of literary “seminar”, where the actual role of seeds is highlighted and entwined with plant metaphor and the mythological and symbolic connotations of trees and seeds.

While knowledge dissemination of climate change effects is usually offered in a scientific and factual vocabulary, Lunde seeks to reach a wider audience, using literary and figurative language to bring home the human impact of such changes. This translation from fact to fiction is one that concerns Trexler in his discussion of cli-fi. Arguably, the analysis of the treatment of seeds and seed vaults in Lunde’s fiction is served by a baseline scientific knowledge of seeds, to help thresh grains of fact from the metaphorical husks of fiction. In *Seeds*, conservation biologist Thor Hanson details how the human diet is thoroughly dependent on different forms of seeds and how plants strategically adapt their seed distribution in myriad creative ways. In the book, Hanson reverses the common metaphor “people are plants”, describing seeds as “babies”, sent forth from their mother plant with a “packed lunch” (10). He further notes that “A seed contains three basic elements: the embryo of a plant (the baby), a seed coat (the box [for protection]) and some kind of nutritive tissue (the lunch)” (10). Furthermore, he details the ability of seeds to lie dormant, awaiting suitable growth conditions—an ability that is exploited in the construction of seed vaults that seek to harness seed potentialities for future generations. As Hanson metaphorically puts it, “Seed banks act as giant libraries of variations that farmers and plant breeders can turn to when certain crop traits are needed” (100-101). Notably, he stresses that regular germination tests are vital, without which “the seeds in any given sample could wink out before anyone notices” (103). Undertaking regular germination tests is so labor-consuming that “no single facility can handle all that planting” (103)—a point pertinent to the fictional treatment of the global seed vault in *The Dream of a Tree*, as will become clear.

Drawing on the theoretical perspectives outlined above, this analysis of *The Dream of a Tree* centers on three plant-related motifs in Lunde’s novel: the tree encountered in the novel’s title and prologue, which alludes to the Old Norse creation myth and establishes certain expectations relative to the protagonist, the plot motif of the seed and seed vault and its associative links to the figure of the child, and the motif of hopeful fertility and renewal versus dystopian sterility and decay played out through the adolescent characters of Tommy and Rakel, and through their younger siblings.

Fallen Ash, Missing Elm

In the prologue of *The Dream of a Tree*, which is set in Longyearbyen in 2097, the reader first encounters the five-year old Tommy on the beach, as he discovers an ash that has been washed ashore, its leaves intact. The parallels to Sturluson’s rendering of Old Norse creation myth is obvious: Sturluson describes how the sons of

Bor, “walking along the seashore found two trees” that they transformed to the first man and woman, from whom “came mankind” (18). As the one finding the tree, Tommy is allegorically positioned as a “son of Bor”. The prologue thus implicitly leaves the reader with the question: will he be able to bring the tree to life, and to sustain the lineage of “mankind”—or foster a “new” (hu)mankind?

The prologue is narrated by a third person, extradiegetic narrator but is partly focalized through Tommy, aligning the reader with his outlook. Still, the perspective oscillates between thoughts that might be attributed to a child his age and information that likely would not be part of the mental framework of a five-year old, such as the information that “Trees washed ashore on Svalbard all the time, giant logs of larch, Norway spruce, and pine, moved by wind and ocean currents, they came here all the way from Siberia” (*Dream* 8).² In the opening scene, Tommy picks a branch from the tree, which has nine leaves—likely an allusion to the nine worlds held together by Yggdrasil. He also pats the grey bark, examines the shape of the leaves, and measures the length of the trunk by counting his own steps. While Ferber observes that “In the Bible a tree often stands for a person, usually to distinguish the godly from the ungodly”, where a godly man “is like a tree planted by the river of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season” (219), Old Norse myth regards men, whether godly or not, as actual descendants of trees, and thus as “tree-persons”, in the sense that they are “kin” of those first two trees, the ash, and the elm. However, the fertility motive holds, as the ash and elm are still expected to “bring forth their (human) fruit.” Embracing the tree, Tommy eventually falls asleep. He is woken by five-year-old Rakel, who is likewise excited about the beached tree. When Tommy angrily insists that the tree is *his* tree, a verbal and physical fight ensues, which eventually is broken up by Tommy’s grandmother. It is she who identifies the tree as an ash. Tommy’s instinctual refusal to share his tree with Rakel reverberates through the story as Tommy and Rakel mature.

A reading of the opening scene in *The Dream of a Tree* as an allusion to the well-known genesis story of Old Norse myth foregrounds the themes of creation and fertility, but also of infertility and demise, since there is only *one* tree, the ash. Against this mythological background, and because the elm is “missing,” Tommy’s insistence that the ash is *his* tree has a certain justification, given that the ash mythologically stands in for the male part of humanity. Symbolically, then, the “dream of a tree” in the novel’s title may be an allusion to the missing female counterpart of the ash. This interpretation is strengthened by considering that the title’s “dream of a tree” is in the singular—if the author meant to encourage an ecological reading, then why not dream of a whole forest? While Tommy does not bring the ash to life in the prologue, mirroring the sons of Bor, he is aided by his grandmother in securing its potential rejuvenation when they collect some of its seeds. Thus, the novel’s main theme

² «Trær skylte i land på Svalbard hele tiden, store tømmerstokker, lerk, gran, furu, beveget av vind og havstrømmer, de kom hit hele veien fra Sibir» (8).

regarding the importance of seed conservation is implicitly invoked, as is the importance of biodiversity (the missing elm).

Read in light of Old Norse creation myth, several thematic strands emerge in the opening scene that also have a bearing on the unfolding relationship between Tommy and Rakel in the rest of the narrative. From such a perspective, the episode on the beach functions as a foreshadowing of how Tommy and Rakel eventually *fail* to become the “first humans” on Svalbard and thus the “seed-bearers” of a “new” humanity. Both Tommy and Rakel are orphaned and, though they are not related, grow up together under the care of Tommy’s grandmother. When the adult population on the island is extinguished in a viral pandemic, they find themselves, as teenagers, the island’s sole caretakers. Getting drunk one New Year’s Eve at seventeen, Tommy and Rakel have intercourse and Rakel conceives. The conflict and fighting, as established in the prologue, intensifies: Rakel is frightened about giving birth alone and wants to get away from the island, seeking help and comfort from more people, while Tommy prefers to remain isolated on Svalbard, living with Rakel and the children, while guarding the global seed vault. Eventually, Rakel calls for help from the old satellite radio—a call to which Tao and the Chinese scientists respond when Rakel promises them seeds from the vault.

The Child and the Seed as Purveyors of Hope

In the first instalment of Lunde’s “climate quartet”, *The History of Bees*, Tao, as one of the focalizing characters, loses her only son Wei-Wen to anaphylactic shock as he is stung by a bee. To the remaining population in future Sichuan (Tao’s story in *The History of Bees* is set in 2098), this is hopeful news rather than a tragedy since the bee sting signals the return of pollinators long assumed extinct. The event leads to a change in the government’s environmental policy, turning to an emphasis on rewilding to further facilitate the revival of local wildlife.

When Tao returns as a focalizer in *The Dream of a Tree*, the reader learns that Wei-Wen has become a cultural symbol in Sichuan: “Because Wei-Wen is the child who changes everything, he is the start of a new time. He represents hope, the good, everything coalesce around him” (81). The link between children and hope is well established in children’s literature studies, where an often-cited tenet is that literature aimed at children must not deprive its child readers of hope. As formulated by Monica Hughes: “I may lead a child into the darkness, but I must never turn out the light” (160). Implicitly, childhood is thus considered a “hopeful” state. Hintz and Ostry tie such a view of childhood as “a space sheltered from adult corruption and responsibility” (5), to a Romantic tradition that regards children as “innocent and pure, close to nature and God” (6), and note that the Romantic association of the child with hope for the future, links the figure of the child to utopia (8). The elevation of Wei-Wen to a symbol of hope and ecological renewal ties in with such a Romantic view of the child. However, as Hintz and Ostry also note, real children do not inhabit utopia (6). Readers of Lunde’s complete climate quartet know that Wei-Wen’s life, as portrayed in *The History of Bees*, had its share of struggles—it is posthumously that he has been turned into a utopian poster child as a state symbol of hope and it is in

The Dream of a Tree that he emerges as such a symbol. Here, Wei-Wen becomes what Johns-Putra terms “a convenient signifier for the future” (7), while the focalization through Tao, via her internal comments, provides a degree of “interrogation” of this symbolic use of her child on the part of the government: Departing for Svalbard, Tao is relieved she will not have to “share her grief in public” during the annual celebration marking Wei-Wen’s birthday (*Dream*, 81), since to her he was a “real” boy, rather than a flawless ideal child.

Dixie D. Massey, Margaret Vaughn, and Elfrieda Hiebert define hope as “a sense of optimism for the future” (575). The definition usefully highlights how hope represents a latent positive potential. Consequently, there is but a short associative leap to the common metaphorical link between seeds, shoots, and hope, given that seeds and shoots—as well as human children—are embodiments and carriers of such future potential. In *The Dream of a Tree*, Lunde relies on just such a metaphorical association to link hope with plants: “Hope is bright green, hope is a sprout, but before the sprout comes the seed. [...] The seed is the core of hope” (82). In this manner, both the child Wei-Wen, and plants, most prominently in the form of sprouts and seeds, are associated with hope in the story. It is significant then, that the plot in *The Dream of a Tree* mainly revolves around the hoarding and guarding of seeds (latent potential), rather than their distribution and germination (realized potential).

Dystopian Decay and Utopian Promise

When he learns that Rakel has promised the Chinese scientists seeds from the vault, Tommy reacts with anger:

She had promised to give away the seeds, as if they were a marked commodity, as if this heritage were hers to trifle with in a cheap transaction. Those coming here, those on their way, wanted nothing but to save themselves and their descendants, he knew this, they wanted to use the seeds to destroy wild nature. They put the small love over the large one, they wanted to consume from the vault, waste the treasure. (*Dream* 426)³

Here, Tommy feels that Rakel has betrayed the intention of the global seed vault. His violent reaction seems at odds with the original purpose of the vault, which was established to safeguard biodiversity, to help restore it after apocalyptic or climatic events, such as those that mark Tao’s future China, where the need for the seeds seems legitimate. On her way to Svalbard, Tao thinks of the seed vault as “the salvation” for Chinese youth: “billowing yellow wheat fields, grain, sweetcorn, rice, soya” (*Dream* 34) and Rakel reminds Tommy that: “We have something up here that belongs to the whole world” (325). Mirroring the episode in the prologue, where he claims the tree just for himself, Tommy replies: “The seeds are only ours now” (325).

³ «Hun hadde lovet bort frøene, som om det var en vanlig vare på et marked, som om denne arven var hennes til å skalte og valte med i en billig transaksjon. De som kom hit, de som var på vei, de ville ingenting annet enn å redde seg selv og sine etterkommere, det visste han, de ville bruke frøene til å ødelegge vill natur. De satte den lille kjærligheten over den store, de ville tære på hvelvet, ødsle med skatten» (426).

As Tao and the scientists arrive to search for the seeds, Tommy argues with her: “We never used the seed storage. And that is how it should be for you too. You ought not to need the seeds” (334). When Tao explains that they are trying to restore biodiversity, Tommy notes that “There are only seeds for farming in the vault” (...) “Robust farming is good for humanity, but animals, plants, all the others, do not need your farming” (335). Hence, his view is that the “big love” for nature should trump the “small love” for human survival.

His reluctance to allow anyone access to the vault is inspired by books he has read about Vavilov, who starved to death rather than give anyone access to his seed bank (*Dream*, 312) and by the admonitions of his grandmother, who, when he once asked her why they did not attempt to plant any of the seeds from the vault in their greenhouse, told him that “This is a bank, Tommy, every country owns their seeds. (...) We have promised not to touch them, promised that they are safe here and that we will look after them, because they might need them again someday” (118-119). Thus, contrary to the practice in real seed vaults of safeguarding the seeds by running regular germination tests (Hanson), in *The Dream of a Tree* the seeds in the vault remain frozen assets of uncertain value.

In having Tommy tend the greenhouse while listening to his grandmother's lessons, Lunde applies two mapping metaphors common in adolescent fiction, where growth is often depicted with the metaphor of humans cultivating plants, but also in the form of “the human mind as a container that needs to be filled, (...) as if knowledge is a fluid poured into the empty vessel of the adolescent's empty but awaiting brain” (Trites, “Growth” 66). Filled with the admonitions of his grandmother, Tommy considers it his duty to protect the seed vault, even to his own detriment.

After a week on Svalbard, Tao and the scientists depart: Their search for the vault is unsuccessful, since, preparing for their arrival, Tommy has managed to screen the entrance, thinking he is protecting wild nature against humanity's selfish need for survival. Leaving in haste, as the water ways are about to freeze over, the Chinese travelers take the younger children with them. Tommy and Rakel have mysteriously gone missing. Eventually, it becomes clear that the pregnant Rakel has fallen to her death in a landslide, initiated by Tommy to help conceal the entrance to the seed vault. Rakel is tragically caught by the landslide just as she and Tommy are having a conciliatory conversation where they finally make up, sharing thoughts over the future of their unborn child. Tommy saves himself, but is now alone on the island, a lonely witness to the departing research ship, after hours of trying to locate Rakel beneath the rocks. Symbolically, he has entombed both Rakel and his own progeny or “seed” (Ferber), thus preventing their growth, while keeping them “safe”—much like the seeds in the global seed vault. His refusal to share, both the seeds and Rakel, has rendered them “impotent.” This dystopian outcome rests in no small part on the common cultural association of seeds with hope.

In her discussion of growth metaphors in young adult fiction, Trites notes: “Although authors can rewrite the script [of metaphorical growth] with a protagonist who dies, they still cannot escape the overpowering concept in adolescent literature

that adolescent embodiment equals a script of psychological growth (“Literary” 54). With Rakel’s death, the physical growth of Tommy’s progeny is certainly stifled, as his own offspring is “nipped in the bud”. While Tommy for most of the story is the custodian of growing things, including his younger siblings and the family’s giant greenhouse, Rakel seems the character more in keeping with a schema common to young adult dystopias in which “The adolescent comes to recognize the faults and weaknesses of his or her society, and rebels against it” (Hintz and Ostry 9), a process involving a perceived loss of innocence, and thus connoting psychological growth. In this sense, Rakel comes across as the more mature of the two, when she insists both that they should leave to reunite with society and that the buried seeds belong “to the whole world.” This promise of growth is undercut as Rakel falls to her death, taking their “child in seed” with her. However, it is possible to read Tommy’s refusal to open the seed vault as a stoic effort to safeguard biodiversity, given his view that agriculture only serves to support the “small love” of human procreation. He certainly pays a high personal price for this view, as his own kin die.

Rakel’s demise, and the departure of the three younger children, which in a young adult novel might have served to move Tommy to comply with the script of psychological growth, here instead underlines the narrative’s dystopian bent when the protagonist suffers a mental collapse in the wake of these traumatic events. The departure from the script of growth typical of young adult fiction is what secures the dystopian feel of the story’s ending, at least relative to the young adult protagonist. But just as the story has two main focalizes, it also has two alternative endings: Things are looking much brighter for Tao, who, while she departs without the seeds, does have the children.

Seeds of Rewilding

Read against Tao’s account of how the Chinese are moving toward rewilding and ecological regeneration, as symbolized by Wei-Wen, Tommy’s fear that they will use the seeds only for the benefit of the “small love” is exposed as potentially unwarranted and out of touch with current realities—and this makes his own breakdown and Rakel’s demise even more tragic.

While plant shoots and seeds are cross-cultural symbols of growth and fertility, in *The Dream of a Tree* the feeling of hope, and its association with seeds and sprouts, is carried primarily by the Chinese characters. The situation is much less hopeful at Svalbard, where the conservative impulse of the protagonist, both in his personal relationships and in relation to the seed vault, serves to restrain the budding hope inherent in growing things. But, as Kay Sambell points out, while “the narrative closure of the protagonist’s final defeat and failure is absolutely crucial to the admonitory impulse of the classic adult dystopia” (165), dystopian writing for young readers tend to end more ambiguously, to preserve “the future possibility, however slim, of a safe space the child protagonists may inhabit” (172).

Such ambiguity is introduced in relation to Tommy’s fate in *The Dream of a Tree*, when he, towards the end of the novel, reestablishes radio contact with his

younger brother, Henry, even as he is unable to say anything, thus leaving the outcome open to the reader's interpretation. In the closing chapter, which is focalized through Tao, the utopian direction of the happy ending is less ambiguous, and carried by the metaphorical entanglement of seeds, children, and hope, as Henry, on a forest picnic with Tao, steals away into an idyllic forest glen. There, in a symbol-laden gesture, he scatters a small bagful of seeds that Tommy once bequeathed him—the seeds once collected from the ash found by the five-year-old Tommy.

Thus, for Tao, Henry comes to embody a real future hope that softens the loss of Wei-Wen, just as Henry's bagful of seeds secures a slim hope of biological renewal and, by extension, the potential continuation of humanity; a symbolic arc built from the combined allusions generated by the prologue's fallen ash and the treatment, both actual and metaphorical, of seeds throughout the novel.

Concluding Reflections

In this essay, I have explored the figurative interrelationships between plants and child- and adolescent characters in Lunde's *The Dream of a Tree*, showing how the story has a dystopian strand, tied to its young adult protagonist. The dystopian story arc, which develops through the story—is symbolically underlined by the motif of seeds that are denied their chance to grow—both in the form of the frozen seeds of the seed vault, to which the protagonist refuses others access, and in the form of Tommy's own genetic "seed", carried by Rakel, that literally falls "on rocky ground" and is enshrined, rather than allowed to develop. This literal "abortion" of the hope symbolically and latently invested in both seeds and children, serves to carry forward the dystopian tone of the previous books in Lunde's climate quartet. At the same time, the development of the adolescent protagonist is described employing common growth metaphors, as the "empty vessel" of his mind is filled, both by his grandmother's teachings and his extensive readings in the library, not least of books about Vavilov and his seed vault. Unfortunately, these teachings lead him to forfeit the chance of actual growth both for himself and his unborn child. Thus, cognitive growth metaphors, and the stunting of expected growth, underpins much of the novel's dystopian rhetoric.

The metaphorical association of children with seeds, shoots, and hope is developed more positively through the story's second focalizer, Tao. Her relationship to the hope invested in seeds and children takes a utopian rather than dystopian turn, as both the children, and the plant seeds carried by Henry, find new land in which to thrive, thus contributing to a healing of Tao's long held grief over Wei-Wen. In this manner, Lunde, in the final instalment of her climate quartet, draws on the metaphorical association of hope and growth with the child characters to shift her writing on climate change in a more utopian direction. By employing two focalizers, she manages to combine a dystopian with a utopian narrative trajectory, while drawing on the deep cross-cultural association of seeds with hope—hope that is both dashed, at Svalbard, and sustained, in China.

Relative to the genre of climate fiction, which seeks to combine fiction and fact, it is fair to say that the reader, through Tommy's conversations with his grandmother

in the greenhouse, gains some knowledge of the growth requirements of real plants. Still, the most potent role of plants in the narrative is metaphorical and symbolic, as both the dystopian and more utopian resolutions to the story hinge on the figurative function of seeds and seed vaults—while little heed is paid to the real-life requirements of actual seeds. This finding aligns Lunde's treatment of plants with patterns found in previous studies of plants in literature more generally (Gagliano et al.) and of plants in Nordic cli-fi for young adults (Guanio-Uluru, "Imagining") more specifically.

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