# Empathy as an Answer to Challenges of the Anthropocene in Asian American Young Adult Science Fiction

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## Abstract

*This article suggests that Malinda Lo's Adaptation duology (2012-2013) and Cindy Pon's Want duology (2017-2019) represent empathy as a desirable answer to challenges of the Anthropocene. Set in near-future Taipei, Want follows a group of teenagers who eventually become militant environmental activists. The teenage protagonists' capacity for empathy distinguishes them from the villainous antagonist and makes them likeable for the readers despite their violent tactics. Lo's duology features two teenagers who are turned into human/alien hybrids by extra-terrestrial scientists after a nearly fatal car accident. The procedure equips the protagonists not only with an accelerated healing ability, but also gives them access to other people's emotions through touch. Although the teenagers at first experience their newfound superpowers as a burden, they slowly realise their significant potential for changing humanity for the better. My article will combine close readings from the novels with research from ecopedagogy to explore in how far novels like Lo's Adaptation and Pon's Want can encourage readers to treat their fellow human beings as well as more-than-human life forms with more empathy.*

**Keywords**: ecopedagogy; empathy; Anthropocene; Asian American literature; young adult fiction; science fiction

## Introduction: The Importance of empathy

Throughout the last decade, the book market for young adult literature has become more diverse with the publication of an increasing number of novels by authors of colour (**Cart, 2016: preface page x**). Simultaneously, the ongoing climate crisis is ever-present in young adult fiction: although environmental concerns such as animal rights have been addressed in literature aimed at adolescents since the late 19th century (cf. Hogan, 2009: 3), contemporary novels tend to engage more explicitly with the problems that the Anthropocene[i] poses 'by raising awareness on climate change and related human rights issues, communicating fears and hopes about the future, and ultimately inspiring creative thinking and action' (**Adami, 2019: 135**). While the Anthropocene causes numerous problems for most life forms on Earth, what I am particularly interested in here is what Martusewicz et al. call 'the cultural roots of the ecological crisis' (**2021: p. 9**). I suggest that the empathy for both other humans and more-than-human beings potentially evoked by the chosen novels can work to question anthropocentric worldviews thereby potentially leading readers away from regarding the more-than-human world merely as an exploitable resource and instead moving towards acknowledging their own entanglement with multispecies environments. Such a shift in attitude then is the prerequisite for more sustainable relationships towards other living beings. This article incorporates both the increasing diversity in young adult fiction and the genre's engagement with environmental issues by suggesting that Malinda Lo's *Adaptation* duology (**2012-2013**) and Cindy Pon's *Want* duology (**2017-2019**) represent empathy as a desirable answer to challenges of the Anthropocene. Literary scholar Suzanne Keen has worked extensively on how to make the concept of empathy productive for the analysis of literature. Keen builds on C. Daniel Batson's eight concepts of empathy and adds her own, 'narrative empathy' to conceptualise how readers empathise with characters accessed through narratives (**Keen, 2019: 194-195**). Both Batson and Keen remain on an anthropocentric level, although scientists have proven certain animals' capacity for empathy since the 1990s (**Dolby, 2019: 406**). Additionally, my article will take Dobb's work into account that differentiates between types of empathy that work to affirm the status quo (what she calls 'doxic empathy') and those that challenge existing hierarchies (what she calls 'critical empathy') (**cf. Dobbs, 2017: 603**). Based on all four scholars, my own approach for the purpose of this article then considers empathy as the ability to share the feelings of other life forms and to imagine oneself in their situation while taking existing power structures into account.

While Pon and Lo's novels are far from the only works of Asian American young adult fiction that address problems of the Anthropocene – I am thinking of the post-apocalyptic setting of Joan He's science fiction novel *The Ones We're Meant to Find*, the class-warfare in Marie Lu's dystopian *Legend* trilogy or Maggie Tokuda-Hall's anticolonial fantasy novel *The Mermaid, the Witch and the Sea* – I have chosen *Adaptation* and *Want* as case studies for this article because of how explicitly they connect social and environmental issues. Set in near-future Taipei, *Want* follows a group of teenagers who eventually become militant environmental activists. The teenage protagonists' capacity for empathy distinguishes them from the villainous antagonist and makes them likeable for the readers despite their violent tactics. The protagonists' likeability encourages the readers' emotional investment in the story and makes reader identification with the characters and readers' support of their fight for more environmental and social justice more likely. Lo's duology features two teenagers who are turned into human/alien hybrids by extraterrestrial scientists after a nearly fatal car accident. The procedure equips the protagonists not only with an accelerated healing ability, but also gives them access to other people's emotions through touch. Although the teenagers at first experience their newfound superhuman powers as a burden, they slowly realise their significant potential for changing humanity for the better. My article will combine close readings from the novels with research from ecopedagogy to explore how far novels like Lo's *Adaptation* and Pon's *Want* can encourage readers to treat their fellow human beings as well as nonhuman life forms with more empathy while recognizing how certain ways of organizing society need to radically shift to ensure that Earth remains a liveable place for both human and more-than-human beings.

## Asian American Young Adult Science Fiction and Ecopedagogy

My work is situated at the nexus of Asian American science fiction, Asian American young adult fiction and young adult fiction as a vehicle for ecopedagogy. The historical entanglement of the genre of science fiction with imperialist ideologies (**as outlined in Rieder, 2008**) has – as Jessica Langer explains – inspired several forms of reappropriation and reversal of the colonial trope of the alien invasion in postcolonial science fiction (**cf. Langer, 2011: 4**). It is against this background that I read how the novels in question engage with science fictional genre conventions. Although Asian American science fiction has received more critical attention in the last decade (with publications like Betsy Huang's *Contesting Genres in Contemporary Asian American Fiction*), scholarly engagement still 'tend[s] to be partial and fragmented' and particularly the 'incredible proliferation of [Asian American] young adult and children's speculative fiction necessitates more critical conversations', as Sohn argues (**2020**). Indeed, there is a scarcity of general research on Asian American young adult

literature (**cf. Park Dahlen, 2020**) and the few works that exist – such as Ymitri Mathison's *Growing up Asian American in Young Adult Fiction* – mostly focus on realist fiction. Thus, my article seeks to open up further discussions, not just about the novels that I analyse here, but also about Asian American young adult science fiction and its social significance more broadly.

To interrogate the novels' social significance and point to ways in which they engage with questions of environmental activism, I employ the ecopedagogical conceptual framework of EcoJustice Education. According to Richard Kahn:

> *[e]copedagogy seeks to interpolate quintessentially Freirian aims of the humanization of experience and the achievement of a just and free world with a future oriented ecological politics that militantly opposes the globalization of neoliberalism and imperialism, on the one hand, and attempts to foment collective ecoliteracy and realize culturally relevant forms of knowledge grounded in normative concepts such as sustainability, planetarity, and biophilia, on the other.* (**Kahn, 2010: 18**)

In time, ecopedagogies have become 'complex and plural in framing and foci' (**Misiaszek, 2020: 617**). All ecopedagogies share their application of the 'basic principles of critical pedagogy to the study of intersecting social and ecological issues' (**Martusewicz et al., 2021: 15**) with the overall 'goal of ending all socioenvironmental injustices and violence' (**Misiaszek, 2020: 617**). To make sense of the anti-capitalist and anticolonial aspects of both book series, I chose to approach them from the perspective of EcoJustice Education, 'an intersectional activist-educator framework', first defined by Martusewicz, Edmundson, and Lupinacci in 2011 (**Lupinacci & Happel-Parkins, 2016: 16**). EcoJustice Education 'critically and ethically examines the intersection of ecological degradation and unjust social suffering in conjunction with the possibility for such a framework to shift Western industrial models of education toward sustainable and socially just teaching and learning' (**Ibid**). What makes this specific approach particularly relevant for my analyses of Pon and Lo's books is its emphasis on a 'pedagogy of responsibility' that urges educators to teach students to:

> *Learn to analyze the deep cultural roots of the social and ecological crises plaguing our world [… and to] identify the diverse cultural practices that encourage relationships of mutual care of both human communities and the natural world […and to] develop the imagination needed to recognize what are mostly unconscious ways of being that are harming the world, and to create solutions, not just for the future but now, in our present contexts.* (**Martusewicz et al., 2021: 18**)

As authors of children's literature and young adult fiction have consciously included 'environmentalism and concern for endangered species' in their works since at least the 1970s (**Hogan, 2009: 179**), an EcoJustice Educational reading of their works can help to figure out in how far those media can contribute to shifting their readers' attitudes towards the more-than-human world.

Despite the early presence of representations of other-than-human species in texts for young readers, it took until the mid-1990s for ecocritical readings of children's literature to gain traction (**cf. Gaard, 2008: 14**). Scholarly discussions on young adult fiction more specifically started later with an increasing number of publications appearing after 2010. An influential example of this trend is Alice Curry's 2013 monograph *Environmental Crisis in Young Adult Fiction: A Poetics of Earth*, in which she analyses how 'young adult novels attempt to develop a sustainable ethic of care that can encompass […] 'feminised' [in the sense of existing 'outside the parameters of the adult white male subject'] peoples and spatialities, including nonhumans and the environment' (**Curry, 2013: 1**). However, unlike the novels that Curry analyses, *Want* and *Adaptation* do not focus predominantly on the 'individual empowerment' of their respective protagonists (**Ibid: 5**), but rather represent the empowerment of Zhou and Reese as inextricably tied to changing their socio-political circumstances. Zhou can only make peace with his mother's (and his substitute mother figure's) death after he has managed to destroy the factory of the man responsible for Taipei's pollution. Reese can only start to explore her own (sexual) identity after uncovering the government conspiracy at the core of the novels' plot. Thus, these books are more in line with Valentina Adami's observation that 'in YA literature, the individual emotional crises faced by the protagonist are often directly or metaphorically linked to political and social issues, so that the most pressing issues of society are connected to the adolescent's quest for identity' (**Adami, 2019: 130**). She continues to argue that '[t]his is particularly true for YA speculative fiction' in general and young adult dystopias in particular, which 'tend to counter the despair of the genre with a hopefulness about the possibility for change, usually expressed by the confidence of the young protagonists who rebel against a flawed society and keep acting and fighting for a better future' (**Ibid: 132**). Although I argue that only *Want* qualifies as a (critical) dystopia, both *Want* and *Adaptation* share 'a hopefulness about the possibility for change' and feature teenage protagonists 'fighting for a better future' through political activism that is committed to both environmental and social justice, as my following analyses will show.

## Empathy as Basis for Environmental Activism in Cindy Pon's *Want*

Cindy Pon's 2017 young adult science fiction novel *Want* takes its readers to near-future Taipei that is ravaged by pollution caused by factories of global corporations taking advantage of a lack of local environmental protection laws. Taiwanese society is socially stratified into wealthy *you* who can protect themselves with expensive bodysuits and impoverished *mei* dying early because of the health hazard that the poor air quality presents. At the centre of *Want* is Jason Zhou, an orphaned *mei* teenager who – together with a group of friends – is working peacefully towards improving the living conditions in Taipei. His friend Arun's mother, ecology professor Dr Nataraj, supports them. After discovering that Jin Feiming, the CEO of a large corporation, has prevented the introduction of stricter environmental protection laws by bribing and threatening politicians, Dr Nataraj is murdered by Jin's contract killers. The assassination of Dr Nataraj causes Zhou and his friends to switch to violent tactics, including kidnapping, burglary, hacking and bombings.[ii] Throughout the whole novel, the teenage activists are portrayed as likeable (thereby encouraging reader identification), and their militant acts are justified through stark representations of the suffering of the *mei* population and through an absolute vilification of antagonist Jin Feiming. An essential component of the characterization in the novel concerns its focus on empathy: whereas Zhou and his friends display empathy towards both other-than-human and human beings, villainous Jin is consistently presented as entirely devoid of empathy. My article reads *Want* as a critical dystopia (in the sense of Baccolini and Moylan). My argumentation builds on Huang's insight that Asian American authors approach the genre of critical dystopias 'by maintaining the delicate balance between hope and pessimism in the face of an unassailable Leviathan' and by creating ambiguous endings that avoid overly simplistic 'solutions underpinned by a nostalgic, illusory belief in our ability to return to an unsullied past' (**Huang, 2010: 140**). Three close readings explore how the novel presents empathy as crucial for ethical relationships, both between humans and between human and other-than-human beings. By considering corporate greed as the primary reason for both environmental and social problems, *Want* connects 'ecological degradation and unjust social suffering' in manner akin to EcoJustice Education (**Lupinacci & Happel-Parkins, 2016: 16**) and might be read as taking an anti-capitalist stand as it contrasts the villain's egotism with the teenage characters' commitment for social justice. While Zhou is at the centre of *Want* – a position that is also emphasised by his status as the only narrator in the whole book – the novel does not cast him in the role of *the chosen one* or an individualistic hero, but rather hints at a sense of collective agency through highlighting the importance of Zhou's friends.

This observation ties in with Victoria Flanagan's insight of a 'rethinking of agency' that is happening in young adult novels by 'suggest[ing] that agency needs to be reformulated – through redistribution, for example, so that it is conceptualised as collective and networked, instead of being based purely on individualism' (**Flanagan, 2014: 5**). This destabilisation of the classic individualistic hero has implications for my reading. I suggest that by offering several characters with whom the adolescent readers are invited to identify, *Want*, on the one hand, allows its readers to play through the consequences of the group's actions for each character and on the other hand, emphasises the need for collective action in the face of overpowering corporate greed. This also relates to the focus on sustainable communities as opposed to merely individual action that EcoJustice Education advocates.

The murder of Dr. Nataraj brings the friendship between Zhou and his clique to a new level by inspiring them to plot their revenge against Jin Feiming. Their plan involves Zhou infiltrating *you* society to gain more information to destroy Jin's factory. To this end, Zhou befriends Jin's teenage daughter and heir Daiyu (and eventually ends up falling in love with her). Towards the end of the novel, it is revealed that Daiyu was aware of Zhou's scheme from the start and provided information willingly, disgusted by her father's unethical business practices. In contrast to her circle of superficial socialite friends, Daiyu is worried by the extreme social inequality of Taipei: She uses her wealth to support social projects and wants to change her father's company for the better. Other members of Zhou's group of friends include 19-year-old Lingyi, a skilled hacker, her girlfriend Iris who stands out with her ninja-like stealth and hand-to-hand combat skills and Victor, a street vendor who is comfortable with stretching the bounds of legality. Arun (the son of the murdered professor) is a highly intelligent medical student who attempts to help the *mei* population by researching lung diseases. He is at the centre of my first close reading.

As part of his research, Arun is developing an antidote to the avian flu. In the passage at hand, Zhou is visiting Arun in his lab after his first test of the antidote has resulted in the death of his six lab monkeys. When Zhou greets Arun, '[h]e gave a dejected shake of his head' and shocks Zhou by only saying: 'They died' (**Pon, 2017: 73**). Arun explains the situation by showing Zhou footage of his failed experiment, his voice 'sounding hoarse' (**Ibid**). Arun is not only disappointed by the setback in his research, but also mourning his lab monkeys. His grief continues when he and Zhou meet with the rest of their group: when asked what is wrong with him, he just 'shrugged, his shoulders sagging. "Hard day, I don't really want to talk about it."' (**Pon, 2017: 74**). Zhou describes Arun as 'so upset, he hadn't bothered to put on a face mask' (**Ibid: 75**) – as a medical student Arun is

acutely aware of the health hazard that the bad air quality poses, so him forgetting his face mask is indicative of his intense emotional upheaval. Although Arun's use of the monkeys as test animals may leave readers uneasy and seems to perpetuate notions of anthropocentrism, a plot twist later in the novel changes this perception. After Jin has ordered his scientist employees to create a new virus for a lung disease and subsequently released it in Taipei to boost the sales of his protective suits, Arun is working hard on the antidote. However, before new lab monkeys have arrived, Arun's friends Lingyi and Iris contract the disease and almost die as a result. To save their lives, Zhou and Victor persuade Arun to inject them with his (untested) new antidote putting them effectively on the same level as his lab monkeys. When his test is successful, Arun is giving away the vaccine for free, in line with the anti-capitalist agenda of the novel: Arun and Zhou organise guerrilla vaccinations, breaking into the warehouses in which infected patients have been quarantined and administering the medicine to them. Overall, though, the novel's representation of animal testing remains anthropocentric: Although Arun is emotionally affected by the monkeys' suffering and eventually involuntarily turns his friends into test subjects, the general necessity of animal testing for medical research is never called into question. Thus, Arun does not understand that 'we [i.e., the human species] are always-and-already entangled with the nonhuman animals that surround us on the planet: they exist not only as species that must be managed, preserved, or rescued within a stewardship paradigm, but as individuals whose lives matter within an approach focused on common worlds' (**Dolby, 2019: 410**). Despite his ostensible affection for the monkeys, Arun still regards them primarily as resources for his research that benefits humanity much more than other species. In the end, the representation of Arun as able to empathize with his test monkeys simply becomes a way to endow Arun with a sympathetic character attribute that works to distract readers from pondering larger questions concerning the ethics of animal testing.

A capacity for empathy is also a central character trait of protagonist Zhou. The passage in which he is helping a stranger (who later turns out to be patient zero of the epidemic caused by Jin's virus) illustrates that nicely. When a *mei* man in his twenties collapses after a JinCorp press conference, Zhou does not run away in a panic like most other bystanders do, but instead tries to help. Despite the warnings of other onlookers, Zhou instinctively touches the man with his bare hands and uses the technology of his *you* suit to check his temperature. The man's condition triggers Zhou's painful childhood memory of his mother dying of a similar disease: 'He was burning up. Just like my mom had' (**Pon, 2017: 122**). Thus, helping the stranger becomes a way for Zhou to reconnect to the helplessness he

felt as a thirteen-year-old boy, but with the difference that his new *you* persona has the means to provide medical care: 'But here, now, there was something I could do. "Command," I said. "Get an ambulance to Liberty Square *now*"' (**Pon , 2017:123**). When a nearby *mei* girl tells Zhou not to bother with an ambulance because of the costs, he retorts: '*I'll* pay for all of it. We can't leave him here. He's still alive' (**Ibid**). In contrast to the indifferent *you* and the resigned *mei* around him, Zhou acknowledges his responsibility by stepping up to help the stranger. Thus, this passage works to characterise both Zhou and the diegetic mainstream society: while the wealthy *you* do not care about the suffering that is happening directly in front of their eyes, the *mei* have given up on expecting any help. Zhou then steps into that void as a prototypical idealist teenage activist for social justice and in doing so might encourage readers not to feel put off by societal ignorance and resignation and to instead stand up for what they believe in.

In contrast to Arun and Zhou who live among the *mei* and have experienced the loss of their mothers due to Jin's involvement and pollution respectively, Zhou's love interest Daiyu has led a very privileged life as the daughter of CEO Jin Feiming. However, unlike her superficial friends who only care about following the latest fashion trends, attending parties, and hooking up with other *you* teenagers, Daiyu spends her free time organising charity events. At one such event, a conversation with Zhou leads her to question her means to improve the lives of other inhabitants of Taipei. Zhou comments on Daiyu's plan to financially support an orphanage by suggesting that 'maybe the best way to help is to prevent their [i.e., Taipei's orphans'] parents from dying so young […] Dying from hunger and illness exacerbated by our polluted air and water' (**Pon, 2017: 105**). Inspired by Zhou's suggestion, Daiyu persuades her father to produce a more affordable version of his protective suits. The readers later learn that her well-meaning plan backfires, as Jin equips the cheaper suits with surveillance software and intends to sell the data that the suits gather. Until the last third of the novel, Daiyu appears to be an obedient daughter who – though much more socially conscious and empathetic than her father – is still invested in keeping up the status quo. Thus, Daiyu starts out as a proponent of a moderate form of social activism that remains 'within a global neoliberal framework, championing "sustainable development" without challenging the unsustainability of an economy advocating endless growth' (**Gaard, 2008: 14**). However, this changes towards the end of *Want*, when Daiyu reveals that she had willingly helped Zhou to bring down Jin after learning that he had ordered the murder of his opponents: 'I knew my father was capable of questionable choices in his business practices, but […] there are no blurred lines when it comes to murder' (**Pon, 2017: 205**). In the end, Daiyu is

radicalised both by her father's unethical behaviour and by Zhou's insistence on widespread social and economic change as the only means to permanently improve the living conditions of the *mei* population. Daiyu's character development might be read as a call for more solidarity between teenagers from different socio-economic backgrounds. Despite the importance of the love story between Daiyu and Zhou for the plot, Daiyu's personal growth is not only a result of her relationship to Zhou, but also of her own empathetic personality combined with an increased sense of self-efficacy. Daiyu continues her activism after the bombing of her father's factory by creating an interactive experience of pre-pollution Taipei in an old theatre that invites guests to view images of the blue sky, smell unpolluted air and feel (artificial) wind and sunshine. This display is Daiyu's attempt to show the people of Taipei what they stand to gain if they work towards decreasing the level of pollution.

At first glance, this ending looks like one of the 'solutions underpinned by a nostalgic, illusory belief in our ability to return to an unsullied past' that the Asian American version of the critical dystopia seeks to avoid (**Huang, 2010: 140**). However, *Want* embraces a certain ambivalence in its final moments: During the successful destruction of Jin's factory, Zhou's friend Victor is killed accidentally. Zhou's hacker friend Lingyi gives evidence for Jin's crimes to the police that causes Jin to flee Taiwan to avoid a trial. Furthermore, the extreme social stratification of Taiwanese society and the problem of pollution remain largely unchanged illustrating the limitations of a single act such as the destruction of one factory. Thus, *Want* avoids the pitfalls of proposing overly simplistic solutions to complex problems and instead challenges readers to think through the ethical implications of militant environmental activism themselves. However, it should be noted that this potential ambivalence is abandoned in Ruse, the sequel to *Want*, when – at the end of the novel – Zhou and his friends manage to get Jin arrested in Shanghai. In *Want*, Zhou still struggles with the potential consequences of his actions:

> *I knew that in order to bring about a revolution, not only would yous be hurt in the process, but many meis as well […] Means to an end. Wasn't that phrase usually used by villains in stories – or, at best, by misguided heroes? But nothing big was ever gained without sacrifice. You grasped that fast enough as a reader from Luo Guanzhong to Tolstoy to Woolf. […] [I]n the end, the truth was a harsh and ugly one: in order to change the status quo, we had to be destructive. Seize control of the narrative. Redirect the plot.* (**Pon, 2017: 131**)

In his line of reasoning, Zhou uses references to canonical authors to justify his violent plan as the only viable solution. The combination of authors mentioned (a 14th century Chinese author, a 19th century Russian author

and a modern British author) might be read as hinting towards some form of universal truth that exceeds geographical and temporal boundaries. His use of bookish metaphors (narrative and plot as signifying the course of development of Taipei) at the end of the quote establish a connection between fictional booklover Zhou and the real-world readers of *Want* and can be read as a request. This connection between narrator and reader is re-established with the final sentence of the novel 'This was only the beginning' (**Pon, 2017: 229**). This sentence cannot only be read as a commentary on the diegetic situation at the end of the novel but might also work as a call to action for the readers. *Want* constitutes a young adult dystopia that follows (rather than renovates[iii]) the typical generic traits as identified by Heinze: A cohesive main narrative is told from the point of view of a teenager with an emphasis on 'plot, conflict, action, and the protagonists[' thoughts and feelings]' (**Heinze, 2018: 30**). What an ecopedagogical reading of this novel can make visible, however, is the (often ambivalent) entanglement of its human protagonists with the more-than-human world. Examples for this are the villain's abuse of biotechnology for his own gain, Arun's caring but simultaneously exploitative relationship to his lab animals or the protagonists' efforts to reduce pollution in Taipei to make the city liveable again for all humans and more-than-human life forms. All those issues offer starting points for a re-thinking of interspecies relationships and a recognition of how capitalist systems turn those commonly considered as less-than-human into commodified, exploitable resources that can be made productive within an EcoJustice Education framework.

## Empathy as Transformative Force for Humanity in Malinda Lo's *Adaptation* and *Inheritance*

The plot of Malinda Lo's *Adaptation* duology focuses on two American teenagers, Reese Holloway and David Li, who after a nearly fatal car accident find themselves in a secret military facility. After their discharge from the mysterious hospital, they soon discover that the 'very advanced medicine' (**Lo, 2012: 49**) that was used to save their lives has had some unexpected side effects: Their bodies are able to heal much faster than before and they are able to share other people's emotions by touching them. Much of the plot of *Adaptation* concerns Reese and David's attempts to learn more about their new abilities and leads up to their discovery that the technology used on them is extraterrestrial in origin. In this article, I focus mainly on its sequel *Inheritance*, in which the existence of extraterrestrial beings on Earth (who are passing for human) is made public and the plot switches between Reese's coming to terms with her new identity as an alien/human hybrid and the societal repercussions of the reveal of extraterrestrial life. In Huang's chapter on the representation

of aliens in Asian American science fiction, she uses Ted Chiang's *Story of Your Life* as an example to show how Asian American authors tend to focus 'on the effort to establish communication' and not – in contrast to many Anglo-American science fiction novels – on the 'requisite struggle for dominance between humans and aliens' (**Huang, 2010: 107**). Although *Adaptation* and *Inheritance* are not as aesthetically and structurally innovative as *Story of Your Life*, I argue that some of Huang's insights can also be transferred to Lo's duology, most importantly the focus away from violent conflict and towards establishing mutual communication to share information to the benefit of both parties. Additionally, Sohn explains that though '[i]t would be simplistic to call all Asian American science fiction texts oppositional, […] these works often operate from within an activist framework and illuminate obscured voices and histories' (**Sohn, 2008: 11**). In both *Adaptation* and *Inheritance*, Anglo-American Reese functions as the only narrator and focalizer inviting readers to share her perspective and to identify with her on a personal level. In *Adaptation*, Reese realises that she is bisexual which makes her one of very few bisexual protagonists in early 2010s young adult fiction (**cf. Cart, 2016: 193**), thus increasing the visibility of a previously underrepresented social group. Furthermore, the novel uses Reese's love interest Chinese American David Li to educate readers about Chinese American history and to address anti-Asian racism. During the duology, Reese and David develop from helpless victims to confident teenagers taking an active role in the negotiation of human/alien relations. After Reese and David are repeatedly abducted (first by the extraterrestrial Imria after the car accident, then twice by the US military) in *Adaptation*, they decide to take matters into their own hands in *Inheritance* and give impromptu press conferences, do TV interviews, and get involved Imria/human diplomatic matters. Their corporeal hybridity positions them in-between the (mostly economic) interests of human politicians and the presumably altruistic plans of the extraterrestrial visitors. I will first analyse the representation of the extraterrestrial Imria in both novels with a special focus on the role that empathy plays in their society. A second close reading will look at Reese's superhuman powers and how her view on them changes: at first, Reese is overwhelmed by the intensity of feeling other people's emotions. However, after training her new abilities, she can deploy them purposefully and – at the climax of *Inheritance* – Reese saves her life by using them. A final paragraph will think through the social implications of Reese's enhanced capacity for empathy.

Although the Imria already appear in *Adaptation*, the first instalment of the series, it is only in *Inheritance*, the final book of the duology, that the readers learn more about their society and their reasons for coming to Earth. Millions of years before *Adaptation* is set, the Imria began to look

for another planet to build a new civilization in their likeness. After the extraterrestrial scientists 'pushed certain species in a different direction' thereby creating the homo sapiens (**Lo, 2013: 229**), humanity was left to develop on its own. However, when the Imria witness the creation of the atomic bomb, they decide to return to Earth and get involved, as Imria leader Akiya Deyir explains: 'We cannot allow you to destroy your planet and destroy yourselves' (**Ibid: 251**). According to Deyir, the Imria regard the human lack of empathy as the main reason for humanity's problems:

> *The foundation stone of Imrian society is our ability to share consciousness with one another: susum'urda. It makes us who we are. From the day we are born, we are connected intimately with our loved ones, and this is the reason that we have survived for so many millions of years. But we failed to give you this ability, and because of that, you grew into a very different kind of people […] your lack of susum'urda made you a violent people, prone to attack rather than to love*. (**Lo, 2013: 267**)

This patronising view on humanity is criticised by Reese who demands that the Imria treat humanity as 'equals' (**Lo, 2013: 254**) rather than regarding them as a failed experiment that needs to be fixed. Thus, the Imria's supposedly elevated capacity is revealed as what Lobb calls 'doxic empathy', i.e., a form of empathy directed from a privileged towards a marginalised party that is not interested in changing the status quo but tends to 'contribute to the ossification, rather than alleviation, of oppressive power relations' (**Lobb, 2017: 598**). Reese - as a character whose hybridity positions her in between the Imria and humanity - contradicts the Imria's framing of humanity as biologically incapable of empathy and instead maintains humans have found ways to work around their lack of *susum'urda* and can still treat each other in an empathic manner if they choose to do so.

Decades prior to the plot of the novel, the Imria's view of humanity as deficient has led them to make a research agreement with the US government and together they started working towards a procedure that can give humans the power of *susum'urda*. Thus, the first encounter between Imria and humans is not a violent one, but rather focuses on cooperation, a tendency that Huang also observes in other Asian American science fiction texts that 'challenge the oppositional thinking that frames encounters with otherness only in terms of conflict and power' (**Huang, 2010: 112**). However, the extraterrestrial DNA that the Imria provide to help to ostensibly improve humanity, is abused by human scientists working in the military-industrial complex with the aim to weaponise animals (which reveals their view on animals as exploitable resources) and create supersoldiers, thereby proving the Imria's assessment of the violent

nature of humanity right. Whereas the military's attempt to turn birds into surveillance tools leads to an international catastrophe when the modified birds cause plane crashes (for more information about the representation of birds in Lo's duology, see Cicholewski), their supersoldier experiments manage to genetically optimise human beings for combat purposes, with superior physical prowess, fast reaction time, but also poor impulse control.

Towards the end of *Inheritance*, protagonist Reese and her two love interests, male human/alien hybrid David Li and female Imria Amber Gray are abducted by those supersoldiers on behalf of the US government who intend to conceal their unethical experimentation with Imria DNA. Due to Reese's training of her superhuman capacity for empathy with the Imria, she can use it to her advantage and save her own and her friends' lives. When Daniela Torres, one of the supersoldiers, insists that she 'can run faster, sleep less, and shoot better than any *normal* human being […] They [i.e., the military scientists] made me into a killer and I'm doing that fine' (**Lo, 2013: 284)**, Reese uses her power of *susum'urda* to reveal Torres' repressed love for her seven-year-old son who was taken away from her. Reese also learns that the genetic modification is slowly killing the soldier: 'Inside Torres's body, Reese felt the decay eating away at her, like a corpse rotting into the ground' (**Ibid: 286**). By promising Torres to take care of her son, Reese can convince her to assist in her escape. Thus, the novels represent the military's attempts to weaponise extraterrestrial DNA as harmful, both to humanity in general (through the modified birds that bring down planes) and particularly to marginalised people (as the soldiers selected for the supersoldier program were offered to participate in the experiment as alternative to serving time in prison). This abuse of the alien's genetic material by the military-industrial complex is contrasted with the Imria's intended use as exemplified by Reese and David who are empowered to experience 'true empathy' (**Lo, 2013: 72**) in the sense of the ability to directly share their thoughts and feelings with other humans and Imria.

As the Imria have designed Reese and David's modification to be inheritable and are offering the procedure to human volunteers, they hope that it can radically transform humanity. Reese's love life provides an example of how this kind of empathy can change human society: due to the power of *susum'urda*, Reese can engage in a consensual non-monogamous romantic relationship with both David and Amber at the end of the book series. Since all three involved parties have access to each other's emotions by touch, they have less problems with jealousy, though the public stigmatisation of non-monogamous relationships in mainstream human society creates difficulties for them, which they eventually escape from by visiting the Imria home planet Kurra 'where plural relationships

were normal' (**Ibid: 324**). Lara Hedberg points out potential problematic implications of this representation:

> *The question must be asked whether the books also suggest that it is only through the use of posthuman bodies that queer relationships become successful. The articulation of Reese's girlfriend as alien, her boyfriend as posthuman, and their connection through posthuman communication positions the implied reader to view open and accepted queer relationships as a manifestation of alien DNA.* (**Hedberg, 2014**)

While Hedberg certainly makes a valid point, it should also be noted that *Inheritance* acknowledges the existence of a 'tiny [human] polyamorous community' (**Lo, 2013: 324**). Furthermore, Lo's employment of Reese as the only narrator encourages readers to identify with her and follow her development from absolutely rejecting non-monogamy towards a more accepting attitude. Indeed, given the scarcity of young adult novels that depict polyamorous romantic relationships at all, the presence of a positive representation of Reese's romantic attachment with both David and Amber in *Inheritance* might already contribute to a normalising of non-monogamy. The move away from heteronormative, monogamous relationships ties in with a de-commodification of romantic relationships (despite capitalist heteropatriarchy) implying that partners are not regarded as one's property, but rather as equals. Kim TallBear explains how consensual non-monogamy can have a 'decolonial potential' that can effectively unsettle the compulsory heterosexual monogamy of white settler societies (**TallBear, 2020: 470**). By explaining that '[s]ettler-colonial governments in the United States and Canada imposed compulsory monogamy that helped privatise and constitute land ownership for settler men, their families, corporations, and states', TallBear also associates the arrangement of interpersonal relationships with environmental issues by pointing out the logic of property that casts both (white settlers') wives and nature in the role of exploitable resources (**Ibid: 473**). Although Lo's duology does not connect polyamory explicitly with its anticolonial agenda, its inclusion of queer consensual non-monogamous romantic relationships works to question the heteronormative conventions usually at play in young adult fiction in general (**cf. Cart, 2016: 194**) and young adult dystopias in particular (**cf. Heinze, 2018: 37**).

While this insight into Reese's love life provides a glimpse into the potential of enhanced empathy to change humanity for the better, the novels ultimately leave open as to what exactly such a transformed human society can look like. Spencer argues that the ending of *Inheritance* represents 'oppressive social systems as immutable and enduring' as it is not 'using the advanced alien race to queer or disrupt, resist, or reimagine culturally constructed categories' (9). I disagree. Instead, I suggest that the

duology remains hopeful about the possibility for positive change and might invite readers to re-think their preconceived notions of how societies are organised. While Spencer reads the novels' emphasis on the importance of empathy as individualising systemic oppression (cf. page 9: 'racism and queerphobia are reduced to issues of individual personal feelings'), I indeed consider the opposite to be the case. I argue that empathy in Lo's duology is not just represented as a way for individuals to relate to each other in an ethical way but also as inspiring collective action.

Reading the duology from an EcoJustice Education perspective directs the attention towards the cultural practices of mutual care that the Imria stand for and contrast them with the greed and quest for domination of the military industrial complex that led to death and suffering of both (marginalised) humans and other-than-human beings. In addition, Lobb's insistence that empathy needs to be considered alongside the power structures that surround it can help provide us with the vocabulary to describe the type of empathy the protagonists of the book series embody. As Reese and David's 'position of (temporary or transitional) authority here is not used to cement, naturalize or reproduce relations of inequality, but is committed to their transformation towards a greater parity of participation', their way of relating to other humans exemplifies what Lobb classifies as 'critical empathy' (**Lobb, 2017: 603**). However, Reese's commitment to advocate for 'a greater parity of participation' is limited to her fellow humans and (despite her initial horror at discovering the military's abuse of genetically modified birds) does not extend to other-than-human life forms.

## Conclusion: The Limits of empathy

My analysis has shown that empathy plays a central role in both Pon and Lo's book series. In *Want,* representing the protagonist and his teenage friends as empathetic works to make them likeable for the readers, while the characterization of the antagonist with an absolute lack of empathy justifies the heroes' violent acts against his property. In Lo's duology, the protagonist's capacity for empathy is turned into a veritable superpower through the introduction of extraterrestrial DNA into her genetic makeup. The empathetic basic attitude of the protagonists in both duologies is inextricably tied to their political activism: In *Want,* Zhou's commitment for supporting the marginalised *mei* population of Taipei is present throughout the whole novel, though he only becomes radicalised into militant environmental activism after his mother figure Dr. Nataraj is murdered. In *Inheritance*, Reese seeks to use her powers to mediate between the occasionally paternalistic Imria and sceptical human socio-political institutions. Thus, both book series not only encourage readers to treat their social environment in an empathetic manner, but also

represent youth political activism as a logical corollary of an empathetic worldview.

However, in both duologies, empathy seems to be limited to other human beings and does not include other-than-human life forms. Although Arun in *Want* is mourning the test monkeys that he unintentionally killed during his medical experiment, his grief does not lead him to question the necessity of animal testing in general. In *Adaptation*, the animals modified with extraterrestrial DNA are represented as dangerous for humans and thus evoke feelings of fear and horror rather than empathy. Despite their continuation of anthropocentrism, both novels can be made productive for discussions concerning human relationships to each other as well as to more-than-human beings: *Want*'s focus on social inequality can serve as a starting point for exploring how the effects of environmental degradation play out differently depending on one's social class, whereas *Inheritance* invites readers to imagine what a society built on empathy might look like. An EcoJustice Educational approach to teaching both book series can build on how the novels connect social and environmental issues and celebrate youth political activism while simultaneously drawing attention to the duologies' shortcomings regarding their unwillingness to question hierarchical relationships between humans and the more-than-human world.

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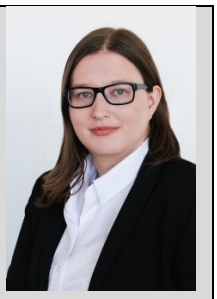

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## Endnotes

[i] The term Anthropocene - as popularised by Paul Crutzen in 2002 - designates an epoch in which human activity has significantly influenced geological processes on Earth **(cf. Crutzen, 2002)**. The term itself has been criticised as downplaying that not all humans are equally responsible for and affected by its consequences and as being anthropocentric and thus erasing its influence on more-than-human life forms **(cf. inter alia Haraway, 2016: 49; Todd, 2015: 244; Yusuff, 2018: 11-12)**. Despite these pitfalls, I am still using the term here as a pragmatic shorthand to encompass the environmental and socio-economic consequences of human induced climate change.

[ii] Ruediger Heinze explains that explicit representations of violence are a common generic feature of young adult dystopias **(cf. Heinze, 2018: 33)**. Due to the resources and skills necessary to perpetrate the acts of violence shown in *Want*, I argue that their representation works to characterise the protagonists as highly intelligent, capable of strategic planning and physically fit (rather than actually inspiring readers to imitate their crimes in real life).

[iii] The fact that the novels feature no white characters, and that queer character Lingyi plays a prominent role (particularly in the second book of the series) sets the *Want* duology apart from the majority of US American young adult dystopias.