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# Beyond Sanctioned Activism in Carl Hiaasen's *Flush*: Sacrifice Zones in Realistic Fiction

ALEXANDRA PANOS

This literary analysis considers realistic children's literature as a powerful means of exploring children's futures within the challenge of environmental and economic degradation today.

**CARL HIAASEN'S *FLUSH*** (2005) addresses one of the key issues of our time: environmental degradation. His story offers children opportunities to think about how to act and behave in the face of environmental challenges and serves as an argument against prioritizing capitalism over the environment and humanity (Klein, 2014; Lewis, 2015). *Flush* is funny and irreverent, and it positions children in complex situations as both agentive and lacking control as they contend with family and environmental problems in the Florida Keys. Current theoretical and media representations of environmentalism advocate for understanding the human side of environmental issues in addition to ecological impacts (Buell, 2009; Garrard, 2004; Heise, 2008; Klein, 2014; Lewis, 2015). Geologists have argued for the declaration of a new Anthropocene epoch due to the clear evidence that humanity has forever altered our planet (Carrington, 2016). Research in children's literature must consider lenses that keep *people* in the foreground when exploring environmental issues. Researchers and educators must consider what children's books can and should mean for children fighting for their futures.

Environmental collapse poses one of the most serious threats to modern life the world has seen. Historic and

ongoing disregard for land and human life (Klein, 2014; Lewis, 2015) have led to what are known as "sacrifice zones" (Lerner, 2010)—those people and places impacted by environmental or economic devastation, sacrificed to outside environmental and economic interests. People in sacrifice zones are often unheard or silenced by those not experiencing the effects or living within the zones. Traditionally, people in relatively stable economies, such as many in the United States, understand these zones as far away, removed from their experiences of economic and physical safety. However, with anthropogenic climate change posing increasing challenges to the globe, those living in sacrifice zones are becoming more vocal and visible—spurred by focused activism against indifference to environmental and economic disaster. We see examples of this in the number of nations who agreed to the Paris climate accord in 2015 (Davenport, 2015), and perhaps even more so in the grassroots support for the Indigenous activists at the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in 2016 (Skalicky & Davey, 2016; Treuer, 2016).

The definition of sacrifice zones has become fuzzier as people not traditionally living in these areas begin to recognize that such places and people exist close to home, too. Major disasters such as Hurricane Katrina in 2005

have taken many lives and devastated communities. In 2012, deadly Superstorm Sandy crashed into the global economic capital. In addition, governments continue to sanction infringement on Native lands (e.g., Treuer, 2016), and there is ongoing and continual degradation of urban spaces like Flint, Michigan (e.g., Smith, 2016), and natural spaces like the Gulf of Mexico (e.g., Mouawad, 2010). Those with historic privilege stemming from skin color, economic standing, and geographic locale, among other things, can no longer lean on conventional conceptions of what counts as a sacrifice zone to deny adverse impacts on human lives and the environment both near and far. While experienced differentially across locales, sacrifice zones do not have discrete boundaries; those with historic privilege, too, are living in sacrifice zones.

### Children's Literature in Sacrifice Zones

Popular today in children's literature, and perhaps even more so in young adult literature, are futuristic tales of dystopian wastelands, stories that spring from either Orwellian fears, as in Piers Torday's *The Last Wild* (2013), or government collapse, as in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993). Hammer (2010) describes such dystopian stories as a means of confronting ecological futures; disaster fiction and refugee journeys of a future society offer *not* so fantastical voyages that create cultural pressure and imagined futures for young readers. Speculative fiction does offer readers the possibility of imaginaries of potential futures and eventualities (Atwood, 2011); climate fiction (cli fi) is now a growing genre within this umbrella grouping in which fictional narratives explore how climate change has devastated human institutions and norms.

Yet, given the current realities of ecological impacts on places and people near and far, Hammer's (2010) argument for using literature to highlight the pressing future of climate devastation can also be seen and made through genres other than cli fi. Boggs, Wilson, Ackland, Danna, and Grant (2016) recently argued for a rubric for children's literature dealing with climate change, underpinning the importance of scientific accuracy and a problem-solving mentality for the child characters. They draw the conclusions that good storytelling that helps "organize conversations about Earth's climate" (p. 674) is central to the work of using children's literature to address environmental issues. Realistic fiction offers the potential to tie readers, in particular child readers, closer to understanding sacrifice zones as interconnected and current: near and far, local *and* global. Realistic fiction can also attend to what it means to push against, and across, local and global impacts on the natural world and the people living therein. I argue that Hiaasen's book

describes environmental and economic impacts in what can be considered a *current* sacrifice zone rather than a future one, thus opening up problem solving about environmental degradation as an existing issue, rather than a future conversation.

In addition to giving readers a full portrait of a specific context, the Florida Keys, Hiaasen develops a credible story of an American setting as part of a globalized and globalizing world. *Flush* offers child readers from the United States in particular a glimpse into the moral dilemmas individuals face when they take action against injustices within a sacrifice zone. Hiaasen's book addresses the intersection of scales of human morality, which range from individual choices all people make to seemingly all-powerful economic interests, that impact the environment. The entwining of human morality and environmental degradation can best be understood through the lens of ecocriticism. Perhaps the most cited definition of ecocriticism (Buell, 2009) comes from Glotfelty (1996), who writes that "simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment... [and] takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture.... [I]t negotiates between the human and the nonhuman" (pp. xviii–xix). For my purposes, I am interested in the ways in which nature and culture frame the lives and actions of children.

### PLACE-BASED VERSUS ECO-COSMOPOLITAN APPROACHES

Previous explorations of environmental issues and justice in children's and young adult (YA) literature have focused either on place-based readings and engagements using children's literature (Burke & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2010; Wason-Ellam, 2010; Wells & Zeece, 2007) or eco-cosmopolitan understandings of children's and YA literature (Barbas-Rhoden, 2011; Hammer, 2010). *Flush* is a text that is hyper-focused on a particular locale, the Florida Keys; as such, it is necessary to consider some of the work on children's literature related to place-based learning. However, *Flush* also pushes beyond notions of the local, interrogating larger systems of economic and environmental power and privilege and placing special emphasis on the work activists must do across contexts and in terms of what is possible given these systems. Heise (2008) defines this as eco-cosmopolitanism, "an attempt to envision individuals and groups as part of planetary 'imagined communities' of both human and nonhuman kinds" (p. 61).

**PLACE-BASED APPROACHES.** Place-based learning advocates attention to specific contexts in order to promote an embodied knowledge and commitment to care for a particular locale. It draws from the work of conservationists

## Realistic fiction about the environment must include children engaged in identifying what counts as a commodity (people? land? animals?) when economic interests are privileged over people and ecology.

and naturalists, such as Aldo Leopold, who emphasize a land ethic approach in orienting to the environment and humanity's place therein. Wason-Ellam (2010), for example, contends that it is through social interactions with geography and people that affective orientations to particular places become articulated. Her autoethnographic account of the artistic, literary, and embodied engagements that might grow from reading children's literature provides examples of how to connect children to place. However, place-based learning has the potential to delimit the local. This restriction leads to the development of binaries of place and space, the environment and the human, and the local and the global through claims that children are displaced by technology or disjointed globalizing flows (Wason-Ellam, 2010), rather than engendering acknowledgment of interconnecting tensions and the ways in which places are undergoing constant construction (Massey, 2005).

### ECO-COSMOPOLITAN APPROACHES AND AFFORDANCES.

Eco-cosmopolitanism springs from ecocriticism and attends to geopolitical tension. Little has been written from an eco-cosmopolitan perspective about children's or YA literature. Barbas-Rhoden (2011) and Hammer (2010) argue that attention to the environment must include working for social justice across the local and global in literature for young people. Hammer (2010) considers three dystopian refugee YA novels and argues that speculative fiction, when written *credibly*, serves as a discourse of protest (Garrard, 2004) in exposing current and ethical issues in order to address focalized representations of power and integrate historic and evolving views of contemporary problems, thus opening up potential global imaginaries for the future. Barbas-Rhoden (2011) does similar work, drawing from the assets of bilingual children's literature for eco-cosmopolitan readings and imaginaries.

What eco-cosmopolitanism attends to, and that place-based approaches do not entirely address, are the ways in which local problems are imbricated in global ones. In Heise's *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008), she

argues, "Developing a 'sense of place' cannot mean a return to the natural in and of itself, but at best an approach to the natural from within a different cultural framework" (p. 45). Fundamentally, what this means is that given the reality of humanity's impact on the natural world, human beings cannot invoke nostalgia for the past to solve our environmental problems. We must consider our cultural realities as they exist now to problem solve for the future. Thus, books for children must address people responding to scales of impacts. Klein (2014) explains how the term "liquid nature" helps to describe these impacts:

Geographer Bram Büscher coined [the term] "liquid nature" to refer to what these market mechanisms are doing to the natural world. As he describes it, the trees, meadows, and mountains lose their intrinsic, place-based meaning and become deracinated, virtual commodities in a global trading system. (pp. 223–224)

I argue that realistic fiction about the environment must include children engaged in identifying what counts as a commodity (people? land? animals?) when economic interests are privileged over people and ecology. Stories should demonstrate what it looks like when children identify, critique, and act against economic impacts on natural landscapes and the people living therein. Children's books must navigate the slippery nature of the impacts that such commodification can have and open up room for questioning the systems of power that play out on local landscapes. The tension found in the interconnectedness of local and global, natural and human, allows children to find space for action. Hiaasen's book develops a realistic set of problems—fighting parents, money trouble, and a deep-seated attachment to a beloved and endangered place—to open up the complexity of interconnectedness and the potential for children to advocate according to their own moral compass.

### Ecocritical Analysis

In this article, I consider the ways in which a realistic fiction book hyper-focused on a specific American context can offer insights into eco-cosmopolitanism and imagined futures for children reading from, in particular, U.S. contexts. Three questions guide this ecocritical examination of Hiaasen's *Flush*, a fictional account of a current natural and peopled sacrifice zone, in which children become knowledgeable activists. In the next section, I describe my methodological decisions in more detail, but fundamental to the literary analysis was answering questions guided by iterative readings of theory and *Flush*. To consider the implications of environmental degradation, I explore the following questions: (1) How are

Noah and his family experiencing a sacrifice zone? (2) How is Noah's home of the Florida Keys a fully realized local context in a globalized/globalizing world? (3) What leads to eco-activism for the children in the book?

#### METHODOLOGY

To answer my research questions, I draw on a tradition of literary criticism and analysis, which seeks to understand intersections between humanity and ecology in literature (Heise, 2008). My process included iterative reading of current theoretical frames on environmentalism and a set of fiction and nonfiction children's books dealing with environmental issues. Across this reading, I noted intersections with pertinent theories (as described above). Ecocriticism has not often been used with children's literature, and rarely have climate change and environmental degradation been addressed in the literature on children's books. With this in mind, I was concerned with focusing on a book, or a few, that would help me explore what literature for young people *should* look like when concerned with the interconnectedness of people and planet. I chose to focus on Hiaasen's *Flush* because it is a well-known book by a well-known author who has a history of focusing on the environment and children's agency. Additionally, *Flush* is an eminently readable book, exciting to children and adults alike. Most important, *Flush* considers the implications of *children* acting at the intersection of the economy and the environment.

#### CARL HIAASEN'S *FLUSH*: A BRIEF SYNOPSIS

*Flush* tells the story of Noah and his sister Abbey, whose father, once again, finds himself in legal trouble after taking action to stop an environmental disaster on his own. While stuck in jail, Noah's father needs help proving that Dusty Muleman, a local power broker, has indeed been dumping his casino boat's sewage into the waters of the marina, thus making nearby Thunder Beach dangerous for people and animals alike. The Coast Guard is of no help—Dusty has paid off lackeys everywhere. In addition to finding evidence to exonerate his father, Noah has to be supportive of his mother, who is not sure she should remain married to a man who puts his anger about an eco-crime ahead of his family. Noah and Abbey's road to environmental activism is paved with an assortment of characters: Lice and Shelley, employees of Dusty's who live life on the margins; Jasper, Dusty's bully of a son; Bull, his muscle; a missing grandfather; and an intimidating ruffian who does Dusty's dirty work. The story is a detective novel, a caper, and a rousing adventure story that is often funny and always both realistic and serious about the problem of systemic impacts on people and the environment.

#### EXPERIENCES OF THE SACRIFICE ZONE

A recent report by Oxfam (Gore, 2015) indicated that the richest 10% of the world's countries produce approximately half of all fossil fuel emissions. Religious and human rights leaders responded to this by advocating collective response, steeped in an awareness of inequity. Bishop Desmond Tutu (2014), in an opinion editorial for *The Guardian*, argued that the "most devastating effects of climate change...are being visited on the world's poor. Those who have no involvement in creating the problem are the most affected, while those with the capacity to arrest the slide dither" (para. 3). Pope Francis (2015) also spoke about the intertwined nature of inequity within the economy and environment in his recent encyclical and argued that we must "car[e] for our common home" (p. 3).

*Flush* addresses the connection of caring and capital by locating Noah and his family as actively fighting against the rich casino owner Dusty, who is polluting their local landscape. The story begins with Noah visiting his repeat offender father in jail for the first time. For readers, the initial exposure to Noah and his father is a complex discussion of right and wrong in the context of these interconnected realities: "I'm not a common criminal.... I know right from wrong. Good from bad. Sometimes I just get carried away" (p. 3). The children grapple with this dissonance, separate from their parents, as they attempt to disentangle what it means to take action in a mature and measured fashion in the face of complex moral choices.

"But why didn't Dad just call the Coast Guard?" my sister asked. "Wouldn't that have been the grown-up thing to do?" "He told me he tried. He said he called everybody he could think of, but they could never catch Dusty in the act," I said. "Dad thinks somebody's tipping him off." (p. 10)

In *Flush*, readers learn how people and places are indeed at the mercy of economic drivers. This dependence complicates notions of right and wrong, as evidenced by the interactions between Dusty Muleman, the Coast Guard, and Noah's father. Power comes in the form of money and access to the brokers of law and order on the water: the Coast Guard. Noah's father has habitually gotten in trouble with the Coast Guard for taking the law into his own hands. He also has limited capability to change the power structure on their island. Even when he sees problematic behavior or actions that hurt people, land, or animals—such as boaters who do not idle in the shallow waters, damaging habitats or ripping the flesh off manatees—the Coast Guard can do nothing; *they* have to see it as well. The Coast Guard does not act to protect local plant-based ecosystems (such as the beach or the sea grasses), animals (such as manatees or turtles), or people, as evidenced by



the prominence of the local trailer park and its inhabitants' reliance on the casino for a pittance of an income. Dusty ensures that his money flows throughout the man-made ecosystem of the island to maintain the status quo, leaving the landscape and the people who populate it seemingly powerless to provide evidence for damage. Noah's father responded to this reality when he sank the casino boat and ended up in jail.

The challenge in caring for "our common home" (Pope Francis, 2015, p. 3) is that the landscape—and the damages to that landscape—morphs and changes based on the power structures of money and access. The Coast Guard cannot or will not see the landscape as it is—corrupted by sewage or ripped to shreds by a motor—because of this endless flow of money from Dusty Muleman and the tourist industry endemic to the Keys. Capital physically changes the landscape, which requires that individuals constantly question who can be relied on to help maintain order or respond to crimes. The Coast Guard is a national body of order, meant to keep people safe and protect the environment on the coasts. However, when the Coast Guard must contend with capital, it becomes clear that the island Noah and his family call home has been recast as less important than the money offered by Dusty Muleman or other local industry. This means Dusty controls the landscape, and it is not ordered by citizens and by a system, such as the Coast Guard, put in place to protect people and land.

**SLIPPERY IMPLICATIONS.** Money, in the book, is slippery: Readers do not see it exchange hands, most characters seem not to have very much of it, and yet it has actual, distinct impacts on the landscape and the people living there. Noah's father sees such impacts in the crimes he attempts to report (or the crimes he decides to solve on his own). However, it is important to note that these changes and impacts on the landscape are both physical and figurative—bought and paid for with slippery money. Here Hiaasen describes the complex relationship between capital, law, and nature in this particular context:

There was one major difference between Dusty Muleman's operation and the gambling cruises up in Miami: The *Coral Queen* didn't actually go anywhere. That's one reason it was so popular. By Florida law, gambling boats are supposed to travel at least three miles offshore—beyond the state boundaries—before anyone is allowed to start betting. Rough weather is real bad for business because lots of customers get seasick. As soon as they start throwing up, they quit spending money.... Only Indian tribes are allowed to run casino

operations in Florida, so Dusty somewhat persuaded a couple of rich Miccosukees from Miami to buy the marina and make it part of their reservation. Dad said the government raised a stink but later backed off because the Indians had better lawyers. (p. 8)

In this story, readers learn about the ways in which money is used to manipulate laws and the natural world: The powerful need to make money, thus they need customers not to vomit, so they need to create permanence in their moneymaking operation. This change to the landscape for the U.S. context required purchased legitimacy in the form of sanctioning through law. Additionally, a historicized and current legitimacy was purchased through Hiaasen's narrative use of a Native American stamp of approval in the form of an Indian reservation as a plot device. It is important to note that Hiaasen portrays the Miccosukee people Dusty bribes as rich and as removed from the Keys (they are from Miami). This casts both the Miccosukees *and* Dusty as shady and underhanded and is a concerning point in the book. We never meet a Native American in the book, we do not hear Miccosukee voices, and, indeed, they are seemingly responsible for giving Dusty his casino.

This purchased legitimacy is both a fixture (mediated by power in the form of precedent, law, and money) and something that remains tenuous: It is a boat on the water, a shifting natural landscape, that can be, and is, sunk and floated. This temporary fixedness is particularly interesting in its ability to both inflict harm and remain impervious to attempts at its removal. It is oil, it is sludge, it is poison—all of which linger and float just as the gambling boat floats on the water. The purchased legitimacy is also a point that readers must read against *and* historically: Who are the Miccosukee tribe? What statistics and norms can help child readers understand economic conditions, marginalization, and violence currently and historically experienced by Indigenous communities, diasporas, and reservations? Why do the Miccosukees have the law on their side in this situation? Would they in real life, and if so, why?

Sacrifice zones are most likely to occur in places like the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation or Flint, Michigan: places disenfranchised by race, gender, economics, ethnicity, and geographic locale. And these places typically do not sanction the actions of men like Dusty, as evidenced by the water protectors at Standing Rock (e.g., Skalicky & Davey, 2016; Treuer, 2016) and outraged parents in Flint, fighting as they are for access to the right to clean and safe water for now and into the future (e.g., Bosman, 2016; Smith, 2016). As children engage with Hiaasen's book, it is important to note how Abbey and Noah make sense of the sacrifice zone in which they live, but also to push back against a

whitewashed version of the historical and current realities of the violence experienced by people living in sacrifice zones.

Adults must help children trouble the very notion of a sacrifice zone. This entails attending to the ways in which children's literature constructs and narrativizes histories and the present, stories of nearness and farness, and offering children background knowledge about violence by which they and their families may historically and currently be privileged or marginalized. *Flush* includes a central conceit about Indigenous communities in the United States that is a major weak point in an otherwise beautiful story, and this must be considered in any reading of it.

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#### LOCAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE GLOBAL

Part of what makes *Flush* a compelling story of a sacrifice zone is the specificity and honoring of the locale: the Florida Keys. Raised in the Keys like his father, Noah is a knowledgeable local citizen. He knows the names and habitats of local flora and fauna and is an avid and thoughtful participant in local practices such as boating and fishing. However, the locale can be understood as natural *and* fabricated. The landscapes include key natural features: the water, the beach, the mangroves, and the mullets. The landscapes also include key manufactured features: the marina, the roads, the motor homes, the boats, and the jail cells. The locale is characterized not only by its specificity but also by its transitory nature, its connectedness through roads, waterways, and money. Noah "was actually born in a 1989 Chevrolet Caprice on U.S. Highway One, [his] dad racing up the eighteen-mile stretch from Key Largo to the mainland" (p. 5). Moreover, when readers consider Noah's name and its allusion to the Bible story of Noah and the Ark, it becomes clear that the tension between spaces and people can be bridged through the natural and the manufactured, the water and the Ark.

The locale can also be understood as fixed *and* liquid (in Büscher's sense, as described earlier citing Klein, 2014). The seemingly fixed aspects of the context come

from power structures: The jail cell and the marina, for example, constitute immovable landscapes for the people living in the Keys. The jail cell Noah's father sits in after he turns himself in for sinking the *Coral Queen* casino boat is at first a positive and jovial place where he *chooses* to be by refusing bail and setting up a headquarters for his crusade to bring down Dusty. Quickly, though, the impact of sitting there and advocating against the casino's pollution changes the space: The police begin to become hostile due to pressure from Dusty, and Noah's mother makes it clear that choosing to remain in jail will mean no family to come home to. Additionally, while the *Coral Queen* seems to survive its sinking and all attempts to remove it, at the end of the book it really is sunk, and the Miccosukee tribe revokes its reservation status to stop the gambling. The marina fundamentally shifts, changes, and becomes a liquid landscape not nailed down by the casino boat at its center.

**CHANGING GEOGRAPHIES.** Ultimately for readers, the common refrain of landscape as anything but static alludes to the constant construction such landscapes undergo in a globalized and globalizing world. Geographer Doreen Massey (2005) argued that there are three tenets of space: Space is produced, a multiplicity, and always under construction. Thus, while Hiaasen set up a very concrete idea of local knowledge of the Keys and his young protagonist as an active and knowledgeable member of this community, he also took pains in the book to explore the ways in which transience and plasticity are a constant context as well. This is part of localizing place in a globalized and globalizing context. These historical and current indicators of place—such as the mangroves, fishing, and marina—can and will change and shift and become meaningless in the context of larger structures of power and at the whim of these structures.

*Flush* describes a world in which law, order, and money swirl around like an eddy, complicating the actions of individuals. Noah and Abbey's parents meet in a courtroom; readers are introduced to Noah and his father in a jail cell. Dusty Muleman, the face of the economic elite with the government in his pocket, represents for Noah and Abbey the antithesis of their father, who habitually shirks the law to do what he thinks is *right* and to do what he *wants*. Sanctioned responses—responses accepted and supported by local laws and cultural norms—to ethical dilemmas such as pollution at a beloved local beach have no impact on moral decision making for Noah and Abbey's father. Noah explains, "Sometimes it's like my father lives on his own weird little planet" (p. 27). However, he does not live on his own planet. Systems of power impact what local landscapes look like and how people live and work therein. Noah's father loses his job because he chose to act in response to eco-crime and was incarcerated. He chooses to sit in jail, with his

wife ready to divorce him, to draw attention to the sewage spewing from the *Coral Queen*, and Abbey and Noah must contend with their normal: a father who refuses to accept their lot in a sacrifice zone and who suffers the economic and personal consequences of a life of eco-activism.

“Noah, you understand why I sunk the *Coral Queen*, right? Every time Dusty empties her holding tank, it’s like flushing a hundred filthy toilets into God’s ocean!” It made me sick to think about it. Still, I couldn’t afford to let my father get himself all wound up again. There was something else I needed to tell him; something even more important.

“Mom wants you to come home right now,” I said.  
“She said it’s not open for debate. No more speeches, she said, no more excuses. Just come home.” (p. 104)

What this book indicates about children’s experiences of sacrifice zones is how unstable and unsettling they can be at a range of levels: in the home, in local public spaces, and in navigating relationships between right and wrong across broader systems of ethics and responsibilities. These necessary, complicated experiences should not be avoided when discussing current environmental realities. Hiaasen also lays out how the complex issues children experience are so interconnected. Imprisoned family, divorcing parents, bullies, and potential illness from local water sources are endemic to Noah and Abbey’s lives in a sacrifice zone. For children, an interest in the plastic nature of landscape means attention to what has stayed the same and what has changed, and, perhaps most important, why. For Noah and Abbey, their long-term familiarity with their locale makes such answers clearer. Some of today’s children might have long-term experiences in their current homes and communities, but not all. Viewing geographies with children as evolving means greater potential agency for and by children.

### ACTIVIST ORIENTATIONS

A contextual and historic sense of ethics and morality guides naturalists, activists, and conservationists. For example, in the United States, circumspection about and respect for the expanse of American geography are called to mind in some of its foundational poetry and literature, such as the writings of Henry David Thoreau, and quintessentially American music, such as “America the Beautiful” (Ward, Bates, & Second Marine Aircraft Wing Band, n.d.). In addition, in the United States, morality is often tied to religion, Judeo-Christian ideals in particular, and a sense of freedom and justice derived from a democratic government. Thus, Noah and Abbey’s parents have created possibilities for morality to play out from their birth in very *American* ways and as part of a family mantra:

As disgusting as it was to be wading through the *Coral Queen*’s toilet crud, I couldn’t leave that beer can out there to float away.... Dad says it’s our duty to clean up after the brainless morons. He says that the smart humans owe it to every other living creature not to let the dumb humans wreck the whole planet. So what we Underwoods do is pick up litter wherever we see it. (p. 139)

Noah’s name alludes to the biblical story of Noah, a man who listened to his God and saved his family and the world’s animals. Abbey’s name, readers learn, refers to a foundational American environmental activist and writer, Edward Abbey. As characters, Abbey and Noah spring from a historical discourse of morality in the U.S. context, with a desire to care for family and planet at their center. This discourse of morality, however, remains in contrast to the erasure of the Native American experience of respect for and worship of the earth.

In addition, the personalities of the characters are set up as historical norms. Abbey, a biter from childhood, can protect herself and will fight back: “When Abbey was a baby, she had a nasty habit that nearly drove us nuts.... My sister was a biter.... When Abbey chomped, she chomped hard” (p. 59). Noah trusts his father’s instincts and sacrifices his own physical safety to defend him and his eco-activism, whether he is getting beat up by Jasper, Dusty’s son; wading through sewage to pick up garbage at the beach; or staring into the barrel of a gun after enacting his own plan to catch Dusty in the act of dumping sewage. Where Noah gets it right and his father got it wrong is in Noah’s decision to be collaborative in his actions. He draws on the strengths, and teeth, of his sister and finds allies across a range of existing power systems.

**DANGERS OF ACTIVISM.** In the current sociohistorical moment in the United States, Oxfam’s report indicates that those experiencing lower economic stability are the most impacted by environmental instability; they experience most acutely the fallout from droughts, major storms, air pollution, and loss of income (Gore, 2015). In the world of *Flush*, Noah’s father directs him to the unreliable Lice Peeking in the hopes that Lice will act as a paid whistleblower by witnessing Dusty’s eco-crime and bringing him down. The pressure this puts on Lice, a poor, drunk gambler, requires too much. He bolts and is presumed dead by his girlfriend Shelley and by Noah. Lice demonstrates how exhausting it is to fight against Dusty’s tightly woven net of physical violence and much-needed money. When Lice disappears, Noah realizes the stronger collaborator, with better access to the system and a desire to get even, is Shelley:



Shelley had guts, no doubt about it. She was going undercover to nail Dusty Muleman, the man she suspected of ordering her boyfriend killed. It was odd, but she looked more sad than scared. I said, "Please don't do this. Stay away from that boat." "What if I told you I really *did* need the dough?" "It's not worth it," I heard myself say. "I don't want something bad happening to you, too.... If you're not afraid, how come you're carrying around that fake gun?" (p. 90)

Lice and Shelley make clear the stakes of the disenfranchised fighting back against the system: physical violence, loss of income and stability, and potentially compromised moral decision making. Shelley takes Lice back in the end of the book; she could not blame him for running. Noah, Abbey, and Shelley's choice to expose Dusty was intensely dangerous.

**LESSONS OF ACTIVISM.** As Noah and Abbey develop their plan to bring Dusty down, they are operating from a historic set of norms that lead them to act on behalf of the environment and other people against systems and groups of people who do harm. They also are aware of the ways the Coast Guard operates; they need visual evidence of an impact on the transitory landscape. "What if we went to the police and told them everything?" [Abbey] asked excitedly. "They'd think we're a couple of whack jobs. We need witnesses, Abbey, not just a hole in a sewer tank" (p. 91). Their idea to use fuchsia dye to bring awareness to the sewage, and the titular "flush" of the dye from the casino ship's heads, means they know the importance of making clear the "virtual landscape" and "liquid nature" of geography (in Büscher's sense, as described earlier citing Klein, 2014).

What is evident in Noah and Abbey's actions is the understanding that their context is not static; rather, its liquidity (physical and metaphorical) requires a response that matches the particular challenges they face: capital that changes the landscape and access to power. They understand how to fight the system in a way their father did not, in collective action that matches the current realities:

The food coloring didn't show up as brightly in the sea as it did in the store bottles, but you could definitely see it. As Abbey and I had hoped, the current and the wind were in our favor, transporting the dye down the shoreline in a shiny stream from Dusty Muleman's basin. (p. 216)

However, as Noah and Abbey quickly learn, money remains a powerful force in the judicial system in the U.S. context: Dusty Muleman was able to pay a fine and regain his place on the marina. In the final action in the book, Noah and Abbey's long-lost grandfather burns down

the *Coral Queen*, seemingly forever banishing it from the landscape of the marina and the lives of the residents of the island. Perhaps he understood what the children were not quite able to: that current realities might mean activists must raze the system to enact real change. Klein's (2014) argument is quite similar: The environmental devastation we are currently experiencing is due to economic factors, a privileging of the economy over the environment and the people. She advocates a system-wide change that counters the current narrative that a gambling boat can still sit in a marina preying on the poor, like Lice and Shelley; flouting historical systems of order; and defying even adaptive attempts, like Noah and Abbey's, to make lasting changes to the liquid landscape.

**AGENCY AND RESPONSIBILITY.** In some ways, the final razing of the system by an adult, their grandfather, can be read as taking away or removing Noah and Abbey's agency. After all, their very smart and deftly carried-out plan did not fully solve the problem of the casino boat and Dusty's polluting, while their grandfather's bomb did. It seems that even while pushing back against sanctioned response, Noah and Abbey had not quite determined that undeniable evidence of wrongdoing was not enough. I would argue that their grandfather demonstrated what it might look like for an adult to take responsibility for systemic change, however individualistic his action was. Noah and Abbey were still *children*. They had guns shot at them and almost drifted out to sea. As adults, we are responsible for educating and sharing examples of how to respond to unfettered violence against nature and humanity by dismantling the system and by learning from children along the way; adults must not expect children to do this work on their own. Perhaps what is wrong with the final act of the book is not the children's loss of agency, but rather that their grandfather's response was not collaborative, as was Noah's when he drew on the collective strength of members of his community in finding allies in his struggle.

### Concluding Thoughts

As a realistic fiction book, do Noah and Abbey's stories offer imagined actions that contend with landscapes as they exist now in a globalized and globalizing world? In some ways, yes. Their awareness of their local context and the systems that act upon it offers examples for children of how to imagine their own contexts as imbricated in larger power structures. Perhaps Noah and Abbey's grandfather's burning of the boat could not be done by children. Perhaps none of what these children did should have to be imagined for real children in the world today. However, these fictional children were in physical danger from bullies, sewage, and guns—and, unfortunately, what they faced is not imagined but real for many children across

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## Children populate these landscapes: children with asthma, children with lead poisoning, and children who know, as Noah and Abbey do, that something is wrong.

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the world because adults continue to operate within a system that thinks sacrifice zones are acceptable. Children around the world, including in the United States, experience environmental and economic instability and violence because of systems that allow men like Dusty Muleman to impact landscapes in lasting, sometimes irreversible, ways. Children populate these landscapes: children with asthma, children with lead poisoning, and children who know, as Noah and Abbey do, that something is wrong.

Environmental activists advocate for interconnectedness in global protest movements (Lewis, 2015). Naomi Klein's recent best-selling book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (2014) and the companion documentary (Lewis, 2015) demonstrate what must factor into activism that considers the current realities of capitalism and the climate: namely, that the historical narrative that allows for sacrificing people and places to untenable economic and environmental stability for *some* people and places is no longer acceptable. Current activism intends to be interconnected and collective and to push back against silencing measures by larger power structures, just as

many of Hiaasen's characters advocate in *Flush*.

I would also argue that future work could benefit from identifying additional realistic fiction examples for young readers that consider the interconnectedness of local problems with global ones and develop credible examples of sacrifice zones for a range of contexts to create a sense of cultural pressure around environmental issues. However, *Flush* does not fully explore the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, economic conditions, or other geographical factors in terms of locating and exploring the consequences of sacrifice zones. It is important to interrogate further intersectionality issues in ecocriticism and in examples of sacrifice zones in children's literature.

Finally, giving such books to young people is a necessary step to understand how they make sense of and organize their own experiences of sacrifice zones (Panos & Damico, 2016). What do they relate to or understand of sacrifice zones and their own connections to the experiences and imaginaries of these books? What is possible for children often depends on what adults and institutions sanction. This book certainly pushes the boundaries of sanctioned activism for people in sacrifice zones and children reading in the midst of high-stakes reading and testing in classrooms today. Children's stakes in their futures, especially in terms of the possibilities their landscapes hold, can and should be interrogated through quality environmental children's fiction. ■

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