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Posthuman Childhood and the Pedagogy of Becoming in Ursula K. Le Guin's Catwings Series

Ursula K. Le Guin'in Kanatlı Kediler Serisinde Posthüman Çocukluk ve Oluş Pedagojisi

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Abstract

This article rethinks childhood in children's literature through a posthuman lens by examining Ursula K. Le Guin's Catwings series as a pedagogy of becoming rather than a narrative of developmental completion. Challenging liberal humanist models that frame childhood as a preparatory, "not-yet" stage oriented toward rational adulthood, the article argues that the Catwings tetralogy resists didacticism, anthropocentrism, and linear maturation. Drawing on posthuman theory, particularly relational ontology, processual-emergent subjectivity, and becoming-with, the analysis shows how Le Guin's winged cats enact subjectivity through embodied movement, interspecies care, vulnerability, and environmental entanglement. Rather than functioning as allegories for human moral instruction, the nonhuman protagonists participate in multispecies worlds where ethics emerge situationally and knowledge arises through encounters. By foregrounding relational ethics over mastery and openness over moral closure, the Catwings series reconfigures childhood as a site of posthuman becoming, offering a model of posthuman education without top-down instruction. The series thus demonstrates how children's literature can cultivate posthuman sensibilities prior to the consolidation of anthropocentric habits of thought.

Keywords

Posthuman childhood, becoming-with, children's literature, multispecies ethics, relational subjectivity

Öz

Bu makale, Ursula K. Le Guin'in Kanatlı Kediler serisini gelişimsel bir tamamlanma anlatısından ziyade bir oluş pedagojisi olarak ele alarak çocuk edebiyatında çocukluğu posthüman bir mercekten yeniden düşünmektedir. Çocukluğu rasyonel yetişkinliğe hazırlayıcı, "henüz-olmamış" bir evre olarak konumlandıran liberal hümanist modelleri sorgulayan makale, Kanatlı Kediler dörtlemesinin didaktizme, insan-merkezciliğe ve doğrusal olgunlaşma anlayışına direndiğini ileri sürer. İlişkisel ontoloji, süreçsel-beliren öznellik ve birlikte-oluş kavramları başta olmak üzere posthüman kuramdan yararlanan çözümleme, Le Guin'in kanatlı kedilerinin öznelliği bedensel hareket, türlerarası bakım, kırılganlık ve çevresel dolanıklık aracılığıyla nasıl edimselleştirdiğini gösterir. İnsan-olmayan kahramanlar, insan merkezli ahlaki derslerin alegorisi olarak işlev görmek yerine, etiğin durumsal olarak ortaya çıktığı ve bilginin karşılaşmalar yoluyla üretildiği çoktürlü dünyalara katılır. Hâkimiyet yerine ilişkisel etiği, ahlaki kapanış yerine açıklığı öne çıkaran Kanatlı Kediler serisi, çocukluğu posthüman bir oluş alanı olarak yeniden yapılandırır ve tepeden inme talimatlara dayanmayan bir posthüman eğitim modelini mümkün kılar. Bu yönüyle seri, çocuk edebiyatının antroposantrik düşünme alışkanlıkları pekişmeden önce posthüman duyarlılıkları nasıl besleyebileceğini göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Posthüman çocukluk, birlikte-oluş, çocuk edebiyatı, çoktürlü etik, ilişkisel öznellik

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Introduction

Within liberal humanist frameworks, childhood has traditionally been viewed as a preparatory stage—a period of cognitive, moral, and emotional incompleteness oriented toward the developmental phase of adolescence—finally culminating in the eventual achievement of adulthood, which marks the "being" of a rational, autonomous subject. Children's literature and young adult fiction have often mirrored this understanding, too. Both genres have historically functioned as didactic apparatuses through which narratives have provided instruction, correction, and guidance toward normative forms of human subjectivity. From early moral tales such as John Newberry's *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* (1744) and Thomas Day's *The History of Sandford and Merton* (1788) to later canonical works like Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868–1869), Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio* (1883), and Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911), children's and young adults' texts frequently deploy allegorical clarity, linear development, and moral causality to instruct their readers in obedience, self-discipline, and rational autonomy. Even narratives that grant voice to nonhuman figures, such as Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* (1877), Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894), or E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web* (1952), tend to instrumentalize animals as vehicles for human ethical instruction, thereby reinforcing anthropocentric hierarchies in which nonhuman life exists primarily to refine human moral sensibilities.[1]

While this is understandable (though not acceptable by twenty-first-century standards) to a certain extent, for those texts that precede the accumulation of "posthuman knowledge,"[2] contemporary young adult fiction still relies on the reappearance of human-centered teachings that embody and naturalize categorizations and hierarchies by amplifying the mistaken equation of posthumanism with transhumanism—even though the latter refers to "an *intensification* of humanism."[3] Much of the current young adult scholarship reduces posthumanist analysis to a critique of technological excess, resulting in a missed opportunity for the rethinking of subjectivity, embodiment, and ethics through young adult literature.[4] This pedagogical asymmetry is central to

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1 Robyn McCallum also problematizes this, noting that "children and adolescent fiction is, on the whole, dominated by humanist conceptions of the individual, the self and the child." See: McCallum, *Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction: The Dialogic Construction of Subjectivity* (Routledge, 1999), 257.

2 In *Posthuman Knowledge* (2019), Rosi Braidotti expands on her earlier arguments that "human" has never been a neutral category and that Enlightenment humanism systematically excluded marginalized groups. By invoking "posthuman knowledge," here, we do not only refer to the problematization of humanity as a politically exclusive, gendered, and speciesist category, but also acknowledge the proliferation of theories and publications addressing these issues. See: Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Polity Press, 2019).

3 Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xv.

4 Anita Tarr and Donna R. White, "Introduction," in *Posthumanism in Young Adult Fiction*, ed. Anita Tarr and Donna R. White (The University Press of Mississippi, 2018), ix–xxii.

what Jacqueline Rose identifies in the title of her work as the "impossibility" of children's fiction,[5] in which the child is viewed as less a real reader than a figure produced by adult desire, ideology, and normative expectation. Narrative authority in children's literature operates covertly, guiding interpretation while masking its disciplinary function beneath seemingly benign storytelling, often "on the basis of their [the adults'] ideas" about what normative subjecthood should be.[6] As such, children's texts are structurally invested in power relations that privilege adult voices, stabilize moral meanings, and limit ambiguity, thus shaping the child reader as an incomplete subject in need of guidance.[7] Overall, children's literature and young adult fiction have long privileged anthropocentric, developmental, and normative models of subjectivity.

Contrary to the general tendency of framing childhood and adolescence as stages to be overcome, however, posthuman themes of relationality, processual/emergent subjectivity, and becoming(-with) bear the possibility of resonating strongly with their target audiences.[8] In this article, we argue that Ursula K. Le Guin's Catwings series quietly but decisively departs from the aforementioned humanist (and transhumanist) traditions by challenging the normative models of subjectivity, resisting moral closure, human exceptionalism, and linear maturation. The stories in the collection strongly resonate with the core ideas of posthumanism that unsettle the category of the human, as well as the temporal judgment through which subjectivity is imagined to develop, thus shifting away from linear, developmental models of the self toward those that foreground "becoming" over "being," and rejecting the notion of subjectivity as a stable endpoint of complete maturation. Subjectivity is understood here as an ongoing process of relational becoming, echoing Rosi Braidotti's posthuman philosophy, which "rests on a process ontology that challenges the traditional equation of subjectivity with rational consciousness, resisting the reduction of both to objectivity and linearity."[9] Anita Tarr and Donna R. White's argument that narratives function as a material body for theory, translating abstract concepts into affective, ethical, and experiential forms,[10] is particularly apt here, because Le Guin's texts not only reconfigure subjectivity through their hybrid figures of the winged cats but also reject the treatment of childhood as a neutral audience category or an immature phase awaiting completion. Published as a collection of four children's stories—namely, *Catwings* (1988), *Catwings Return* (1989), *Wonderful Alexander and the Catwings* (1994), and *Jane on Her Own* (1999)—the series imagines characterization as a form

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5 Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (Macmillan, 1984).

6 Perry Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature* (The John Hopkins University Press, 2008), 5.

7 Maria Nikolajeva, *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers* (Routledge, 2010).

8 Zoe Jaques is one of the first scholars to argue that children's literature is a crucial but underexplored site for posthuman thought due to its persistent destabilization of human–nonhuman boundaries, contending that children's fiction reflects, anticipates, and shapes posthuman ethics and ontologies. See: Zoe Jaques, *Children's Literature and the Posthuman: Animal, Environment, Cyborg* (Routledge, 2015).

9 Rosi Braidotti, "Posthuman Humanities," *European Educational Research Journal* 12, no. 1 (2013): 14.

10 Tarr and White, "Introduction," xviii–xix.

of posthuman identity formation and envisages childhood as a site of posthuman becoming, where relational ethics precede mastery, and subjectivity emerges through embodied, affective, and interspecies entanglements. In this light, we examine Le Guin's tetralogy along two posthumanist axes, the first of which defies the establishment of the humanist subject, and the second destabilizes the understanding of childhood as a "not-yet" stage.

The Two Theoretical Axes: The Posthuman Subject and the Posthuman Child

The first axis considers how the series reconfigures relationality and the posthuman subject formation by depicting the winged cats as hybrid companion species, thereby advancing a zoe-egalitarian worldview that reimagines intelligence, agency, and belonging beyond anthropocentric frameworks. In this axis, we contend that Le Guin's narrative explores a subjectivity that is fluid and relational. Central to posthumanist thought, this fluid and relational subjectivity "relies on intense defamiliarization of our habits of thought through encounters that shatter the flat repetition of the protocols of institutional reason."[11] Rather than valuing the nonhuman characters based on their similarity to their human counterparts, Le Guin emphasizes interspecies caring, communication, and emotional connection. The winged cats' subjectivity, therefore, does not necessarily resemble that of the so-called "ideal human" but emerges within a posthumanist framework, defying the humanist belief that intelligence and value are inextricably linked to logical consciousness, rationality, or language and discourse.

In the second axis, we trace Karin Murris's pedagogically oriented theorization of what she calls the "posthuman child."[12] Murris critiques how, within the humanist legacy, children are positioned as not-yet-knowers who must wait either for adult instruction or for biological development, or both, to gain epistemic legitimacy.[13] Such a temporal deferral, for Murris, reinforces the idea that knowledge is something transmitted from adults to children, rather than something that emerges through relational engagement.[14] In alignment with Murris's concept of the posthuman child, Le Guin's tetralogy, we argue, does not reposition the child as a more competent version of the humanist subject but proposes a posthuman reconfiguration of the child, which solidifies relational material subjectification and supports ethical and socially just literary and/or educational practices. Just as Murris's posthuman child dismantles the assumption that children's literature must possess a didactic role, Le Guin's series voices an inclusive and participatory narrative, in which hybrid children (in this case, the winged kittens) collaborate with one another and/or other animal species, as well as human children. The narrative thus deconstructs the belief that human adulthood represents the apex of being and knowing, exposing how children,

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11 Cosetta Veronese, "Can the Humanities Become Post-Human?: Interview with Rosi Braidotti," *Relations* 4, no. 1 (2016): 98.

12 Karin Murris, *The Posthuman Child: Educational Transformation through Philosophy with Picturebooks* (Routledge, 2016).

13 Peter Moss, "Introduction," in *The Posthuman Child*, xi–xii.

14 Murris, *The Posthuman Child*, 9–10.

animals, and other "earth dwellers" have historically been excluded from full epistemic participation. At the same time, the series avoids a re-romanticization of the child as a naturally wise or innocent agent just for the sake of reversing the adult-centered logic of Enlightenment humanism. Instead, the narrative helps readers acknowledge the destabilization of the notion of an independent child-subject, and understand the child as embedded within a dense web of material–discursive forces that shape what can be said, known, felt, and done.

Blending these two axes rather than treating them separately in our analysis, we claim that Le Guin's Catwings series challenges conventional frameworks of children's literature by resisting anthropocentric storytelling and foregrounding relationality, multispecies coexistence, and nonhuman agency beyond didacticism and fantasy. While these narratives may appear to simply recount the adventures of winged cats across urban and rural spaces, they offer a surprisingly rich and fertile ground for posthumanist inquiry. The first book, *Catwings*, introduces Thelma, Roger, James, and Harriet, who are born with wings in an urban alley. Concerned for their safety, Mrs. Jane Tabby, the mother, urges her kittens to use their wings to escape the dangers of the city and seek a safer life elsewhere. The siblings flee the city and explore the countryside, where they encounter a range of unfamiliar challenges. Despite these difficulties, they eventually discover a peaceful forest in which to settle. They later meet two kind human children, Susan and Hank, who offer them food and shelter in an abandoned barn. In the sequel, *Catwings Return*, two of the flying cats, James and Harriet, decide to return to the city to visit their mother. Upon arrival, they find that their former home has been destroyed and that their mother has disappeared. But here, they rescue a frightened black-winged kitten from a demolished building. The siblings eventually reunite with their mother, who is now living safely on a rooftop, and bring the rescued kitten, her daughter, to the countryside, where she is named Jane. The third book, *Wonderful Alexander and the Catwings*, introduces a new character, Alexander, an ordinary cat without wings. After becoming lost and trapped in a tree, Alexander is rescued by Jane, who introduces him to her family. As Alexander adapts to his new life among the Catwings, he helps Jane overcome her fear of speaking, which is a trauma rooted in her earlier experiences with rats in the city. The final book, *Jane on Her Own*, follows Jane as she grows restless with the safety of life on Overhill Farm and leaves home in search of adventure. She eventually returns to the city, where a man she calls Poppa discovers her and exploits her uniqueness by turning her into a media sensation known as "Miss Mystery." Although initially surrounded by attention and indulgence, Jane soon feels trapped and realizes that her fame may endanger the other Catwings. She ultimately escapes and finds her mother, Mrs. Jane Tabby, living with Sarah Wolf, a kind elderly woman. Through Sarah's understanding, Jane regains her sense of self and acknowledges the freedom to fly, thus discovering a deeper sense of happiness. The story concludes with Jane embracing her wildness and flying freely across the city.

Co-constitutive Relationality

Le Guin's narrative thus establishes relationality first through a material ecology of precarity. The alley where the mother and the kittens are initially based is an active web of forces that presses on bodies and possibilities. The kittens' earliest world is composed through traffic, waste, hunger, and interspecies pressures rather than through individualized self-making, as the narration insists:

> Car wheels and truck wheels rolling past all day-rubbish and litter-hungry dogs endless shoes and boots walking, running, stamping, kicking-nowhere safe and quiet, and less and less to eat. Most of the sparrows had moved away. The rats were fierce and dangerous; the mice were shy and scrawny.[15]

Read through a posthuman lens, this description foregrounds how subjectivity is co-constituted by infrastructures such as the pavement and traffic, multispecies relations ranging across sparrows, rats, mice, and dogs, and affective atmospheres that involve danger and scarcity. The kittens are introduced not as encountering a world that awaits them readily but as already entangled within the world, and their life chances are distributed across nonhuman actants and urban matter. Relationality, therefore, is the story's baseline ontology, and "becoming" is framed as a survival-oriented shift in capacities and orientations. It is for this reason that Mrs. Jane Tabby's insistence on flight is an urgent reconfiguration of the kittens' relation to danger, space, and futurity: "you have wings to fly from [this place]. I want you to do that. I know you've been practicing. [. . .] I think you are ready. I want you to have a good dinner and fly away-far away."[16] The logic here is neither developmental teleology nor heroic transcendence. The wings prompt an embodied reorientation, in which practice, readiness, dinner-as-energy, and departure-as-escape are involved, and thus, becoming is inseparable from material conditions. Flight, then, becomes an adaptive method for continuing to live, which reframes "growth" as an ongoing negotiation with risk.

In fact, this is the case from the very beginning. The series opens with an ontological anomaly that remains deliberately unresolved: the kittens are born with wings, but no authoritative causal account is ever provided. Mrs. Jane Tabby's speculative remark—"Maybe they have wings because I dreamed [. . .] that I could fly away from this neighborhood"[17]—does not function as an origin myth so much as a relational figuration of desire, constraint, and possibility. The wings emerge, as the readers are left to infer, as an embodied response to precarity, violence, and urban deprivation. Such a refusal of explanatory closure or logical justification is significant in the sense that it allows for openness prevalent in posthumanist narrative strategies. In humanist developmental narratives, difference is typically framed as either deficit or enhancement, something to be corrected or optimized. In contrast, the kittens' wings do not orient them toward a telos of superiority or transcendence. On the contrary, the wings intensify vulnerability: they expose the kittens to danger, visibility, and displacement, such as when the kittens encounter humans in surprise and shock, or when Poppa exploits Jane's uniqueness as a media sensation. In

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15 Le Guin, *Catwings* (Orchard Books, 1988), 12.
16 Le Guin, *Catwings*, 15.
17 Le Guin, *Catwings*, 11.

the first book, the dialogues between the four siblings about "Shoes" or "Hands", i.e. humans, also showcase this:

> "Do you remember the Shoes?" Harriet asked [. . .].
> "Yes," James said. "Some of them chased me once."
> "Do you remember the Hands?" Roger asked.
> "Yes," Thelma said. "Some of them picked me up once. When I was just a kitten."
> [. . .]
> "They squeezed me. It hurt. And the hands person was shouting—'Wings! Wings! It has wings!'—that's what it kept shouting in its silly voice. And squeezing me."
> [. . .]
> "A human bean?" said James.
> "A human being?" Roger said.
> "Yes," said Harriet. "It saw me too."
> "Did it chase you?"
> "Did it kick you?"
> "Did it throw things at you?"
> "No. It just stood and watched me flying. And its eyes got round, just like ours."
> "Mother always said," Thelma remarked, [. . .] "that if you found the right kind of Hands, you'd never have to hunt again. But if you found the wrong kind, it would be worse than dogs," she said.[18]

Le Guin stages this encounter with "human beings" as a gradually assembled perceptual object, built from the kittens' embodied scale, mobility, and vulnerability. In the siblings' conversation, humans first appear as "Shoes" and "Hands," i.e., partial, metonymic apprehensions that register the threatening (or potentially sustaining) interfaces through which power touches the kittens' world: being chased, kicked, seized, squeezed, or thrown at. Thelma's recollection of the "Hands" picking her up and squeezing her while shouting foregrounds the body as the primary medium of interspecies encounter and misrecognition, long before any stable social category can be formed. In other words, what the kittens know first is not "the human" as a coherent subject, but a set of material acts—such as grasping, squeezing, and chasing—that distribute agency across limbs, voices, and affects. This is precisely where the text's posthuman drift becomes legible: subjectivity and meaning do not pre-exist relation; they crystallize in and through contact zones, where power is felt as pressure on flesh, speed in pursuit, or the sudden narrowing of options. That the kittens only later stumble toward the phrase "human being" via James's phonetic slip and Roger's corrective marks the exposure of how contingent the so-called anthropocentric clarity is. What appears as a comic element, i.e., their apparently false taxonomy, then, cannot be ruled out as "incorrect;" because rather than "wrong," it is situated, scalar, and relational. From a posthuman perspective (and in the spirit of Cary Wolfe's critique of humanism's self-authorizing category of "the human"),[19] what counts here is that the human appears as a negotiated figure within a

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18 Le Guin, *Catwings*, 35–37.

19 Wolfe refers to the Enlightenment-derived assumption that "the human" functions as a stable, universal, and self-legitimating category grounded in rationality, autonomy, and species exceptionalism. In *What Is Posthumanism?* (2010), Wolfe critiques this framework for positioning the human as the normative

multispecies field, one that can be parsed as shoes, hands, noises, eyes, or eventually, a being capable of offering food. This perception-by-fragments also resonates with Braidotti's emphasis on processual becoming:[20] The kittens' understanding of the human is an ongoing recalibration of relation that involves fear, curiosity, appetite, and risk, through which both parties become thinkable to one another. More importantly, the siblings' dialogue refuses the moralized binary of "humans as saviors" versus "humans as villains," instead framing the interspecies encounter as ethically indeterminate and therefore structurally open. The category "Hands" thus, becomes a relational index for differentiated possibilities of care and harm, rather than a universalizing claim about "human nature." Read through posthuman relationality, then, this is more than a child-friendly simplification, a simple element of humor, or, in literary aesthetics terms, a Shklovskyan defamiliarization.[21] It is a narrative method for undoing anthropocentric certainty. The kittens' world is organized around the situated ethics of what a body does in proximity to another body, and what kinds of becoming(-with) a particular encounter makes possible. Within this framework, as Murris notes,[22] following Karen Barad's agential realist account of posthumanist performativity,[23] beings materialize through ongoing intra-actions with human and nonhuman others.[24] The child (and therefore, in the case of Le Guin's series, the kitten) cannot be understood

measure against which all other forms of life, cognition, and agency are hierarchically defined and excluded. Posthumanism, in contrast, challenges this self-grounding logic by exposing the human as a historically contingent, relational, and materially entangled construct rather than an ontological given.

20 Braidotti's emphasis on processual becoming rejects the notion of subjectivity as a fixed, self-identical state and instead conceptualizes the subject as an ongoing, relational process. In *The Posthuman* (2013), she draws on Deleuzean ontology to frame identity as a dynamic assemblage shaped by affects, relations, and material–discursive forces. From this perspective, beings *are not* but continually *become*, with agency emerging through embodied, situated, and non-teleological transformations rather than through humanist ideals of autonomy, coherence, or completion. See: Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Polity Press, 2013).

21 Shklovskyan defamiliarization (*ostranenie*) refers to the aesthetic strategy of rendering the familiar strange in order to disrupt habitual perception. In his essay "Art as Technique" (1917), Viktor Shklovsky argues that automatized modes of seeing dull perception, and that art intervenes by slowing down, complicating, or estranging representation so that objects and experiences are encountered anew. Defamiliarization thus resists transparency and immediacy, foregrounding process, mediation, and perception itself rather than stable meaning or recognition. See: Shklovsky, "Art as Technique" (2017). Here, Le Guin's narrative seems to employ a similar aesthetic strategy, but the humorous elements function pedagogically, helping readers unlearn the clichés of anthropocentric narratives.

22 Murris, *The Posthuman Child*, xi–xii.

23 Barad's posthumanist performativity reconceives agency not as an attribute of pre-existing subjects but as an enactment emerging through intra-action. Barad argues that matter and meaning are co-constitutive, with phenomena produced through ongoing material–discursive practices rather than representing an external reality. See: Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (2003), https://doi.org/10.1086/345321.

24 For Barad, beings do not pre-exist their relations but materialize through ongoing intra-actions with human and nonhuman others. In *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007), the author emphasizes that

as an autonomous individual who gradually acquires agency, voice, and competence. These qualities emerge relationally, through entanglements with bodies, materials, discourses, environments, technologies, and other species. Knowledge, in this view, emerges unpredictably through encounters. Each act of knowing introduces something new into the world, challenging deterministic and developmental models of learning. This emergent epistemology requires plurality, difference, and interdependence. The child (the kitten) is an open system continuously intra-acting with others. Subjectivity extends beyond skin, beyond age, and beyond species.

In such relational scales of subjectivity, then, especially in times of danger, flight functions as a survival strategy rather than an ascension fantasy. This dynamic closely echoes Murris's critique of developmental teleology, which frames the child as a "not-yet" being whose value is measured by future maturity rather than present relational capacity. Murris argues that such frameworks enact an onto-epistemic injustice, positioning children as ontologically incomplete and epistemically unreliable.[25] In the Catwings series, by contrast, difference is not something to be outgrown. The kittens do not "grow out of" their wings, nor do they grow into a normative adulthood that would render those wings symbolic or obsolete. Instead of marking exceptionality, the wings embed the kittens within a web of interdependencies, such as maternal care, sibling coordination, human-animal thresholds, and spatial negotiation, all of which foreground the idea of "becoming–with" over becoming-someone.

Becoming-with

The text, in fact, proposes a form of "becoming-with" by formulating the kittens' identity and difference as relationally produced in encounter, misrecognition, and desire. When the pigeon attempts to categorize them as "birds,"[26] for example, the exchange displays how species boundaries and identities are negotiated in contact zones. Here, subjectivity emerges as a shifting relational configuration. The pigeon's unease, Harriet's laughter, James's wordplay, and Roger's longing together produce a scene in which flight is a medium of interspecies comparison and aspiration. Becoming-with thus includes friction, surprise, refusal, and admiration, all of which are affective vectors through which hybrid beings come to matter in a shared world.

As the kittens leave the city, Le Guin foregrounds learning as an embodied recalibration of sensation and movement. The countryside is not romanticized as a pre-given refuge but is experienced first as unfamiliar matter that resists mastery: "A soft ground—a strange ground! The

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entities emerge through relational practices, where agency, matter, and meaning are dynamically co-constituted within specific material–discursive configurations. See: Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, 2007).

25 Murris, *The Posthuman Child*, 7–9.

26 Le Guin, *Catwings*, 18.

only ground they knew was pavement, asphalt, cement. This was all new to them, dirt, earth, dead leaves, grass, twigs, mushrooms, worms. It all smelled extremely interesting!"[27]

This moment underscores how knowledge emerges through bodily encounter, as the "strangeness" of the ground signals that safety must be learned through contact, testing, and adjustment. The kittens' becoming is thus inseparable from material textures such as soil, softness, and resistance, which actively participate in shaping what kinds of movements, pauses, and orientations are possible. In this sense, the environment functions as a pedagogical agent, teaching through sensation rather than explanation. This embodied pedagogy continues through the kittens' encounter with water, where curiosity, risk, and sustenance converge in a moment of tentative exploration. When the kittens confront the creek, Roger's hesitation and James's pragmatic curiosity illustrate how ethical action arises situationally. When they wonder what the water contains, James says: "I think it's dinner."[28] The exchange here is neither framed as right versus wrong nor resolved through adult authority, rather, it indicates ethics as responsive and experimental, emerging from the immediate needs of the body and the affordances of the environment. Where the creek provides a relational node through which fear, hunger, and curiosity intra-act, learning moves toward a provisional coexistence with the environment.

Le Guin thus resists replacing urban danger with pastoral innocence, articulating instead an ethics grounded in continuous vigilance and relational judgment. The narrative voice's reminder—"They knew they had come to a much better place than the alley, but they also knew that every place is dangerous, whether you are a fish, or a cat, or even a cat with wings"[29]—articulates a posthuman ethics that refuses both security fantasies and moral absolutism. Danger is not externalized as a flaw of the city or a failure of progress; it is understood as an ongoing condition of living within entangled worlds. This framing dismantles the developmental promise that maturity or relocation will resolve vulnerability, foregrounding ethical responsiveness as an ongoing practice of attunement to shifting relations among bodies, spaces, and forces. Safety is thus positioned as something to be achieved through collective negotiation, adaptability, and care.

Such negotiation, adaptability, and care are also visible in the kittens' encounter with Susan and Hank, the human children. Here, Le Guin carefully avoids framing the human children as rescuers or moral exemplars. The scene is structured around hesitation, distance, and mutual observation, emphasizing relational negotiation over immediate trust or authority. Later, as these relations develop, Harriet performs aerial tricks, lands on Susan, and purrs as Susan and Hank promise never to capture, cage, or reveal the flying cats. The two children seal their vow by shaking hands, acknowledging human cruelty. Roger then joins them, landing on Hank's shoulder, affirming trust and secrecy between children and nonhuman kin.[30] This is a significant moment as it reveals how ethical relation emerges, not through intervention but through the refusal to

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27 Le Guin, *Catwings*, 23.
28 Le Guin, *Catwings*, 24.
29 Le Guin, *Catwings*, 25.
30 Le Guin, *Catwings*, 44–46.

dominate. The human children do not assume entitlement to the cats' bodies or difference; they acknowledge the Catwings' desire to remain partially unknowable and unpossessed. In this way, the narrative models an ethics of proximity without capture, unsettling the humanist impulse to convert encounter into control.

The sequel, *Catwings Return*, revisits the city as an ethical test of responsibility that emerges through relationality, activated by sensory memory and affective attachment to material remnants of shared life. Harriet's nostalgic question—"Remember the lovely smelly sardine cans in the garbage?"[31]—encapsulates how the alley is remembered as a dense relational archive. Garbage is presented as a site of nourishment, play, and cohabitation that binds the kittens to one another and to their past, transforming the narrative to a feline-centered perspective. This recollection of Harriet and her siblings exemplifies how belonging emerges through shared material encounters, like smells, textures, and residues. The alley, then, exists as a lived relation sustained through memory and sensation, demonstrating that subjectivity in Le Guin's narrative is rooted in entanglement with the material world. This relational ontology is further developed through the kittens' return journey, which is guided by sensory recognition and embodied memory. As the narration describes,

> [t]hey sniffed the wind, and whether it was their Homing Instinct that guided them, or their noses that recognized the familiar smells, they flew slowly [. . .] to the narrowest, dirtiest alley in the oldest, poorest part of the city."[32]

The text deliberately withholds a definitive explanation—instinct or smell—thereby resisting humanist binaries between nature and cognition. What matters instead is that orientation emerges relationally, through bodily attunement to environmental cues, while the disappearance of the dumpster[33] shatters any notion of home as a fixed location. Home is thus revealed as a relational construct, vulnerable to erasure through infrastructural and economic forces, and its loss destabilizes the kittens' sense of continuity without offering narrative consolation. The demolition scene intensifies this relational framework by showing how becoming and subjectivity emerge through affective response rather than coherent selfhood. The violent transformation of the alley—"roaring, grinding, crashing, hammering, men shouting, metal screaming against stone"[34]—is registered viscerally by the kittens' bodies. James's terror renders him motionless while Harriet's fear propels her into frantic movement and vocalization: "Mother! Where are you? Mother, we're here!"[35] These divergent responses illustrate that subjectivity does not manifest as a unified, rational agent but as emergent, affect-driven orientations shaped by relational loss and urgency. Harriet's repeated calling does not resolve the crisis or restore order but performs subjectivity as becoming, formed in real time through fear, attachment, and the destabilization of the familiar. The

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31 Le Guin, *Catwings Return* (Atheneum Books, 1989), 6.
32 Le Guin, *Catwings Return*, 9.
33 Le Guin, *Catwings Return*, 9.
34 Le Guin, *Catwings Return*, 10.
35 Le Guin, *Catwings Return*, 10.

self here is enacted through relational rupture, marking a posthuman understanding of agency as contingent, embodied, and situational.

The third book, *Wonderful Alexander and the Catwings*, also introduces relationality and becoming, but it does so through Alexander's first solitary movement beyond the domestic enclosure, where the world is not pre-known but revealed through encounter. The narration emphasizes that Alexander's understanding of reality is initially bounded by the fence that surrounds him and that this belief is unsettled through embodied exploration: "He was surprised to discover that there was another side to the fence."[36] The presence of the cows, described as "very large black-and-white strangers, who said 'Moo!' to him,"[37] showcases becoming as an encounter with alterity that exceeds Alexander's existing interpretive framework. Relationality here is marked by surprise and scale difference, and as such, Alexander grows through exposure to beings whose existence disrupts his assumptions about the world's limits. This disruption is extended through Alexander's attempt to impose his own communicative norms onto others, revealing relationality as asymmetrical and resistant, and not necessarily mutually assimilative. When Alexander insists, "'You should say Mew, not Moo!'," the cows' response by simply looking at him and going on chewing[38] quietly refuses anthropocentric (or in this case, feline-centered) expectations of shared language. Meaning does not converge, and difference persists without resolution. Alexander's subsequent encounter with the dogs intensifies becoming through fear and embodied vulnerability, as he looks down at "those sharp white teeth, and the dogs' bright eyes" that "were looking up at him—far, far up tree."[39] Becoming is then framed as a sudden reconfiguration of position, scale, and power where survival depends on relational shifts rather than self-assertion.

Emergent Subjectivity

Emergent subjectivity is most clearly articulated in Alexander's experience of waiting, exposure, and learning-with others. Alone in the tree, Alexander's sense of self is shaped through his entanglement with nonhuman forces, such as the wind and the tree, which registers subjectivity as relational rather than interior, emerging through dialogue with impersonal and vegetal agents. This relational emergence is transformed into becoming-with through Jane's alliance, and the descent from the tree unfolds collaboratively: "One branch at a time, step by step and paw by paw, she led him down,"[40] foregrounding learning as mimetic, embodied, and interdependent. Alexander's later settlement at the farmhouse then culminates in negotiated coexistence with the outdoor

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36 Le Guin, *Wonderful Alexander and the Catwings* (Scholastic Inc., 1994), 2–3.
37 Le Guin, *Wonderful Alexander and the Catwings*, 2–3.
38 Le Guin, *Wonderful Alexander and the Catwings*, 3.
39 Le Guin, *Wonderful Alexander and the Catwings*, 6.
40 Le Guin, *Wonderful Alexander and the Catwings*, 17.

environment and the mice, whereby becoming is never finalized but remains distributed across environments, bodies, and shared practices.

The final book of the series, *Jane on Her Own*, frames relationality through an explicit articulation of danger that accompanies difference, marking a shift from implicit vulnerability to conscious ethical awareness. When Jane's siblings warn her—"Because if human beings saw cats with wings, they'd put us in cages in zoos… Or they'd put us in cages in laboratories" and conclude that "Being different is difficult… And sometimes very dangerous"[41]—difference is both a condition of survival and an object of reflection. Subjectivity here begins to emerge through collective narration: Jane's understanding of herself is shaped by the anticipatory fears and historical knowledge of others. Becoming is thus relational in cognition, formed through shared memory of what capture, exhibition, and experimentation mean within human–animal power structures. The self is produced through warning, care, and inherited vulnerability rather than through individual choice or autonomy. However, Jane's solitude further complicates emergent subjectivity by situating loneliness as a relational effect rather than a psychological deficit. Her reflection—"Did having wings mean she had to be lonely?"[42]—frames identity as inseparable from interspecies relations that fail to reciprocate. Birds, despite sharing wings, do not offer community, and "owls and hawks were dangerous,"[43] emphasizing that similarity does not guarantee belonging. Jane's subjectivity thus emerges through exclusion as much as connection, revealing how relationality includes asymmetry, refusal, and threat. Becoming here is not oriented toward integration into a stable social group but toward navigating fractured ecologies where affinity is partial and contingent. The narrative resists resolving this loneliness through moral reassurance, instead allowing it to remain an open condition of being different.

The encounter with Poppa explores a complex scene of becoming-with that blurs care, exploitation, and affective dependency without collapsing them into a simple moral binary. Poppa's admiration shown with adjectives like "amazing" and "terrific" and Jane's embodied response with "folded [. . .] wings," "curl[ing] up," "purr[ing] a little," and "f[alling] asleep"[44] display subjectivity as emerging through exhaustion, touch, and sensory comfort rather than conscious consent. This relational entanglement deepens as luxury and attention replace freedom: "No cages! No zoos! No laboratories!" yet Jane is surrounded by velvet-lined carriers, silk curtains, and constant spectatorship.[45] The absence of physical confinement does not negate capture, and yet, capture is redistributed through admiration and spectacle. Jane's later realization—"If everybody knows there is one cat with wings… maybe they'll go looking for more catwings"[46]—marks a critical moment of emergent ethical subjectivity, where responsibility extends beyond the

41 Le Guin, *Jane on Her Own* (Atheneum Books, 1999), 6.
42 Le Guin, *Jane on Her Own*, 9.
43 Le Guin, *Jane on Her Own*, 9.
44 Le Guin, *Jane on Her Own*, 12.
45 Le Guin, *Jane on Her Own*, 16.
46 Le Guin, *Jane on Her Own*, 25.

self to the multispecies collective. Becoming is thus articulated as an ethical awakening that arises from relational consequence, exposing how visibility itself can function as a technology of harm.

The Kittens as Cyborg and Companion Species

The kittens' wings mark them as Harawayan cyborg figures but in an expanded, non-technological sense of the term. Donna J. Haraway's concept of the cyborg is not limited to machinic hybridity alone; it names a figure that unsettles origin stories, blurs categorical boundaries, and emerges through situated relations rather than essential identities.[47] And this is precisely what makes the Catwings such figures, neither mythical creatures nor allegories of technological enhancement. They are materially embodied hybrids whose wings do not separate them from the world but entangle them more deeply within it. Their bodies are not instruments of mastery but sites of exposure, vulnerability, and relational negotiation.

As a further extension of the cyborg as such, the Catwings can also be understood as companion species, not because they accompany humans in familiar domesticated roles, but because their very existence is shaped through multispecies contact zones. Haraway insists that "becoming is always becoming *with*—in a contact zone where the outcome, where who is in the world, is at stake."[48] The kittens' becoming is inseparable from their mother's precarity, the dangers of the urban alley, the affordances of flight, the threat of dogs, the ambiguity of "Hands," and later, the collaboration of or the conditional care offered by human children and adults. Their wings are not detachable attributes but relational organs that emerge at the intersection of fear, desire, care, and movement.

This is particularly evident in how flight functions narratively. The kittens fly because the ground is unsafe, because the city is violent, and because remaining still would mean death. Yet again, the sky is also suggested to be unsafe for them due to owls and hawks. They belong to both spheres and yet belong to neither. In Haraway's terms, then, they become worldly through their embodiment of both avian and land-based characteristics. Their hybrid, cyborg embodiment thus intensifies a sense of ethics, forcing constant recalibration of distance, trust, exposure, and care. Even Jane's later spectacularization as "Miss Mystery" exposes the dangers of extracting hybridity from its relational contexts and turning it into an object of consumption. Once detached from multispecies reciprocity, the cyborg body becomes exploitable. This is why the Catwings resist both the technophilic fantasy of enhancement and the technophobic nostalgia for purity. They inhabit what Haraway calls "naturecultures," in which "relations of significant otherness" take place;[49] that is, spaces where bodies, environments, affects, and power relations co-constitute one another without clean boundaries. In this sense, Le Guin's series offers a quietly radical cyborg

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47 Donna J. Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 6.

48 Haraway, *When Species Meet* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 244.

49 Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 15.

pedagogy, training readers to recognize that bodies become meaningful only through the relations they sustain.

Subjectivity as "Catting"

This relational understanding of subjectivity is further sharpened when read alongside Tim Ingold's insistence that beings are better understood as verbs rather than nouns. Ingold's proposal that is reframed by David Ing as "humans are humaning, baboons are babooning, reindeer reindeering"[50] allows us to understand the Catwings not as stable characters who possess fixed identities, but as beings "continually catting" in relation to their environments. The kittens, then, do not "have" subjectivity as a pre-fixed possession but they enact it through movement, care, hesitation, fear, and play. Le Guin's refusal to anthropomorphize the cats, therefore, is crucial here. The kittens orient themselves through smell, sound, kinship, hunger, flight paths, and spatial attunement; it is clear throughout the series that they do not reason like humans or aspire to human norms while their human speech is obviously for narrative purposes only. Their intelligence does not rely on a form of cognitive mastery but is shaped through situated responsiveness, which aligns closely with the posthuman idea that subjectivity unfolds along paths. In this way, they defy the category of the human, of the cat, of any species as a fixed entity. For example, Alexander's integration into the Catwings' family does not require him to become winged, hinting that he might be differently abled within the winged cat community, and yet he is still welcome and embraced in his own sense of being. While he remains grounded, fearful, and hesitant to embrace his own becoming, it is through shared movement and mutual adjustment that Alexander learns "to cat" differently, just as Jane learns to inhabit her voice through relation. These transformations that "rebuild" and "make" Alexander and Jane (and other Catwings) who they are, in fact, are recalibrations of attunement, as we argue above, and cannot be thought of as developmental milestones that would be foregrounded in traditional worldviews that place childhood as a transition stage to full completion of subjectivity. What matters is then how the cats go on together, rather than what they are. In this sense, the Catwings series actively resists the classificatory

[50] David Ing elaborates on the concept of "becoming-with" by calling this process "becoming alongside," in which animate beings are defined by their ongoing co-emergence with others rather than by fixed essences. This view is influenced by ecological anthropology and processual ontology. Borrowing from Tim Ingold's argument in *Being Alive* (2011) that life is not a noun-like possession but an active process, Ing notes that such beings are better understood grammatically in the verb form (e.g., "to human," "to baboon," "to reindeer"), emphasizing life as an active, situated unfolding rather than a static state. Thus, "humans are humaning, baboons are babooning, reindeer reindeering" becomes a heuristic for understanding beings as becoming in relation rather than as fixed categories, enabling us to reframe the Catwings as continually "catting" within their ecological and narrative milieu. See: Ing, "A Philosophy of 'Becoming with' as 'Becoming alongside'," *Coevolving Innovations*, 17 October 2018, https://coevolving.com/blogs/index.php/archive/a-philosophy-of-becoming-with-as-becoming-alongside/; and Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (Routledge, 2011), 174–75.

impulse that dominates humanist-anthropocentric children's literature as the narrative emphasizes co-presence, co-motion, and co-vulnerability. To read the Catwings series as Ingoldian verbs is, then, to see subjectivity as an ongoing practice of staying responsive within a meshwork of relations. Such a verb-based, relational ontology has profound implications for how childhood is imagined in the series. As Murris argues, the humanist child is positioned as a "not-yet" being, valued primarily for what they will become rather than for who they are in the present. Le Guin's Catwings tetralogy disassembles this temporal hierarchy by presenting childhood as a site of posthuman becoming-with: The kittens participate fully in ethical decision-making from the outset, deciding when to flee, whom to trust, how to care for siblings, when to return, and when to leave again. These choices are situated responses to unfolding conditions, and from this participation, knowledge emerges. Importantly, Le Guin avoids reversing the hierarchy by romanticizing the child as inherently wise or pure. The kittens make mistakes, misjudge dangers, hesitate, and fail. Their agency is real but not sovereign. As a result, they embody the posthuman child per se, whose epistemic legitimacy rests on an entangled participation in a world that exceeds them.

Conclusion

Overall, Le Guin's series does more than depict posthuman themes. It performs a posthuman pedagogy that resonates with Murris's call for ethical and epistemological justice, by which childhood is positioned as a mode of living-with that exposes the fiction of adult completion itself. Within this posthuman pedagogy, which is a mode of learning that does not presuppose a sovereign, self-contained subject who acquires knowledge through linear development, but one that understands learning as emergent, relational, and materially entangled, learning is foregrounded as an ethical and ontological process that unfolds through intra-action, vulnerability, and shared exposure to uncertainty.

This orientation resonates strongly with Le Guin's refusal to frame the winged cats as figures in need of correction, improvement, or normalization. The kittens are never positioned as deficient beings who must acquire human traits, such as speech, reason, or moral self-reflection to gain narrative legitimacy. Rather, they already participate in meaningful worlds through movement, sensation, affect, and care. Their subjectivity is not something they grow into by accumulating reason or language, but something that continually emerges through relational processes.

The absence of overt didacticism is crucial. The Catwings series participates in what might be called anti-didactic children's literature, where meaning is transmitted through narrative restraint. Le Guin withholds explanatory authority, refusing to translate nonhuman experience into fully legible human terms. This refusal creates space for a different kind of learning, which operates through attunement rather than instruction. Readers are not told *what* to think or *how* to behave but are invited to dwell in uncertainty, vulnerability, and relational negotiation alongside the Catwings. In doing so, the text cultivates a posthuman mode of attention prior to the consolidation of anthropocentric habits of thought. Through this framework, the Catwings tetralogy ultimately offers a model of posthuman education without instruction, inviting children to imagine

coexistence within a multispecies ecology where subjectivity is distributed, relational, and perpetually in formation. Childhood, in Le Guin's vision, becomes the site where one learns, often intuitively and affectively, how to live with others without mastery. This reorientation carries significant implications for posthuman theory, suggesting that ethical posthuman subjectivity may be cultivated not through philosophical abstraction but through narrative experiences that precede conceptualization itself.

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