Uncertainty and the Limits of Narrative

Introduction to special cluster of *Frontiers of Narrative Studies*

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Uncertainty is not an easy word to unpack. Partial knowledge of the past or present can create uncertainty, but so can the inability to form a coherent image of the future. Cognitive scientist Andy Clark (2016) argues that our brains are prediction machines, and that they evolved to cope with (and even benefit from) the constant failure of our predictions—that is, the world's inherent uncertainty. In individual terms, uncertainty is part and parcel of everyday life, a background to our interactions with the world that barely registers in consciousness—unless, of course, our predictions break down in spectacular ways. This brings us to uncertainty on the level of whole societies. The COVID-19 pandemic has familiarized much of the world with abrupt changes threatening to uproot one's way of life. Sociologist Anthony Giddens (1990) introduced the term "ontological security" to refer to the degree to which people can count on the stability and continuity of their lives. This kind of security doesn't just depend on an individual's material and psychological conditions but entails trust in institutions and shared social practices that were rapidly called into question by the pandemic: scenarios we know from postapocalyptic or dystopian literature—emptied-out supermarkets, deserted streets, etc.—suddenly felt uncomfortably close. This destabilization created specific, and for many people unprecedented, forms of uncertainty.

Even in the aftermath of the pandemic, the world we live in is traversed by numerous other instabilities that bear on ontological security: from the war in Ukraine, with its catastrophic impacts both locally and globally (e.g., on the world's food supply), to geopolitical tensions between the US and China. Perhaps most importantly, though, anthropogenic climate change is jeopardizing the future of human societies either directly (though rising sea levels and global temperatures) or by making catastrophic weather events more likely, and more devastating, around the world.[1] The climate crisis is also a crisis of confidence, particularly among younger generations, in the governmental and international institutions that cannot agree on coherent and effective mitigation strategies, or that fail to acknowledge the existence of the problem in the first place. Indeed, environmental studies scholar and educator Sarah Jaquette Ray notes how the students she teaches are part of a "climate generation" so "frozen by their fears" that they are often unable to "even form a mental image of the path ahead, much less a future that they could thrive in" (Ray 2020: 2).

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[1] For more on climate change and uncertainty, see Lewandowsky et al. (2014) as well as Bunzl (2015).

The uncertainty results in a fragmentation of the future into a number of mutually exclusive scenarios, which go from the optimistic to the catastrophic, to use the terminology favored by climate scientists. There is uncertainty built into climate models, and this is something that science—particularly science communication—struggles to handle. This uncertainty, which is perfectly normal in scientific proceedings, feeds directly into climate skepticism (see Lewandowsky et al. 2014; Norgaard 2011). It is also one of the causes of climate or eco-anxiety, as researchers in fields including psychology and anthropology are calling various manifestations of stress related to environmental threats. In Steven Taylor's words, "people who have a great deal of difficulty tolerating uncertainty will find climate change to be particularly stressful. The intolerance of uncertainty is a personality trait that is a vulnerability factor for a variety of types of anxiety-related pathology" (2020: 2).

Uncertainty is not just an empirical fact, however, but can have significant ethical ramifications, as philosophers Richard Bradley and Mareile Drechsler (2014) remind us in their distinction between multiple *types* of uncertainty. The climate crisis is deeply uneven in its effects, since marginalized or disadvantaged groups and communities in the developing world are much more vulnerable to its effects: think about the availability of air conditioning and the life-or-death difference it can make during a heat wave. On the other hand, there is inequality in responsibility vis-à-vis climate change, with the richest 10% of the world's population causing roughly 50% of greenhouse gas emissions.[2] Facing up to climate change also means realizing that we—individuals in the wealthy Global North—are historically and personally complicit in environmental devastation. There is a clear moral dimension to this implication: as Greta Thunberg remarked in a famous speech, "the bigger your carbon footprint, the bigger your moral duty."[3] This awareness of moral responsibility can also feed uncertainty—for instance, regarding the decision whether to have children or the sustainability of the way of life we have learned to take for granted.

In short, there is uncertainty all around us, and it manifests itself psychologically, culturally, and ethically, in relation to climate change but also to other crises of the present. What position can narrative practices take vis-à-vis this background of uncertainty? By narrative practices, we mean social practices that employ narrative as a way of making sense of reality—whether in the form of oral storytelling, media discourse, or artistic representation.[4] Across this wide gamut of practices, storytelling is often tasked with juggling and negotiating the many meanings of uncertainty: stories can resolve uncertainty, or alternatively they can help us contemplate it and gauge its ramifications. But is resolution always useful and desirable, or should we stay with the uncertainty, to paraphrase Donna Haraway (2016)? Largely, the answer depends on the context: there are important differences between the cultural function of fictional stories (as in novels, film, and video games) and nonfictional ones (as in science communication or journalism), and these differences have considerable implications for the negotiation of uncertainty.

Nevertheless, the field of narrative studies is ideally positioned across disciplines (literary and media studies, philosophy, the social sciences, etc.) to ask how stories are

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[2] Data from https://emissions-inequality.org/.

[3] See https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jan/25/our-house-is-on-fire-greta-thunberg16-urges-leaders-to-act-on-climate.

[4] Contemporary cognitive and transmedia narratology has tended to see narrative practices as a continuum instead of narrowly focusing on literary narrative (e.g., in the genre of the novel). See Fludernik (1996) and Ryan and Thon (2014) for further discussion.

dealing with societal uncertainty, and how they *should* deal with that uncertainty in order to fulfill their communicative and pragmatic purpose (whatever that purpose may be). That is the agenda that inspires the three articles collected in this special cluster of *Frontiers of Narrative Studies*. The articles grow out of an online workshop organized by the NARMESH project (2017–2022) at Ghent University.[5] The workshop built on themes already explored by literary and narrative theorists, particularly within the field of econarratology, on how contemporary literature can capture and negotiate the uncertainties of the present.[6] As a recent special issue of *Style* argues (see Ameel and Caracciolo 2021), engagement with the social and ethical dimensions of uncertainty is one of the hallmarks of contemporary literature. A wide range of media practices are envisioning uncertainty as a central element of the climate crisis, using the resources of narrative form to encapsulate the unknowns of a climatologically and socially unstable future (see Caracciolo 2022). However, many important questions remain underexplored, particularly with regard to the role that narrative and uncertainty play beyond artistic representation, in the broader cultural framing of the current crisis.

The articles collected in this special issue interrogate three cultural contexts for engaging with uncertainty (in general, and climate uncertainty specifically) through narrative: respectively, the discourses of education, history, and social media. In this way, we highlight how discussions on uncertainty in narrative theory can have important ramifications for how storytelling is deployed across a wide range of practices. Sowon Park's contribution shifts the focus from the literary representation of uncertainty to uncertainty as part of how stories are encountered and framed in the classroom. Taking her cue from debates on the value of trigger warnings in higher education, Park argues that such warnings—seemingly aimed at the reduction of uncertainty—are unhelpful and unable to account for the diversity of students' background and familiarity with traumatic experiences. Instead, Park develops a concept of "intersectional reader" that is more sensitive to the multiple ways in which present-day uncertainty (particularly climate and pandemic uncertainty) can affect readers of differing backgrounds.

Zoltán Boldizsár Simon discusses how narrative as a cognitive mode fails to address the unique challenges of climate uncertainty—which Simon distinguishes from earlier modes of uncertainty under the rubric of "unfathomability." Combining literary theory and the philosophy of history, Simon argues that historiographical storytelling has played a major role in modernity's strategies of crisis management. However, this approach is hitting diminishing returns as societies are confronted with the unfathomability of climate futures. Simon suggests that historical accounts should turn instead to non-narrative modes of understanding, including visual and experiential models influenced by literary practices.

Finally, Maria Mäkelä's contribution also centers on the limitations of narrative vis-à-vis uncertainty, critiquing the tendency (in the media but also in the field of ecocriticism) to see climate change stories as a catalyst for pro-environmental action. Mäkelä argues that narrative's bias towards individual protagonists and human-like "experientiality" (Fludernik 1996) creates significant challenges, particularly in Internet-based social media practices. Here, personal stories become viral in ways that fail to represent or even engage with the

[6] For more on econarratology, see James and Morel (2020).

radical uncertainty of climate futures. Mäkelä points to the #MeToo campaign as a possible model for climate change communication that avoids the pitfalls of virality.

Taken together, these articles advance the conversation on narrative and uncertainty by reminding us that no single cognitive instrument—not even an instrument as powerful and pervasive as narrative—can master the multiple facets of uncertainty in times of social and environmental insecurity. Rather, what we need is a flexible, context-sensitive approach in which narrative is used in combination with other cognitive and communication strategies, and with full awareness of the limitations of narrative when it comes to negotiating unstable futures.

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