Storying the Anthropocene: Narrative Challenges and Opportunities in Times of Climate Change[1]

Marco Caracciolo

marco.caracciolo@ugent.be

Ghent University

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Abstract

The Anthropocene—the proposed name for the current geological epoch—raises significant challenges for narrative. On the one hand, the "era of the human" presents a protonarrative structure in which humanity becomes the protagonist of geological history, triggering devastating consequences that are, in themselves, highly tellable. In other respects, however, the human-nonhuman tangle that underlies the Anthropocene and attendant phenomena (particularly climate change) *resists* narrative meaning-making. This chapter examines both sides of this complex relationship, arguing that an adequate narrativization of the Anthropocene requires formal experimentation and keen awareness of the limitations of storytelling.

Introduction

"Both narrative and the Anthropocene are products of humans writing worlds," argues Erin James (2020a, 187). In the case of narrative, James is thinking about *storyworlds*, the imaginary domains created by storytellers as they stage a number of characters and relate their actions. "Writing worlds" is a metaphor that may involve actual writing—in prose narrative, for instance—but also oral language and audiovisual cues. For the Anthropocene, what counts as "writing worlds" is more complicated. "Anthropocene" is the label popularized by atmospheric

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scientist Paul Crutzen in the early 2000s for the current geological epoch (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000; Crutzen 2002). It had been used two decades earlier by another scientist, Eugene Stoermer. Building on Stoermer's work, Crutzen observed the scale of humankind's impact on the planet, through—among other things—the extensive use of its resources and the release of plastic and other pollutants into the environment. Anthropogenic climate change is perhaps the most salient manifestation of humanity's influence: by burning fossil fuels and thus altering the Earth's atmosphere, humanity has triggered a rapid shift in climate patterns, one that may well be irreversible and is already having devastating consequences for nonhuman species and human communities around the world. Particularly in the wake of the industrial revolution, the effects of human activity have proven so dramatic that they are ushering in a new geological epoch: from the Holocene, we have entered the Anthropocene, the "era of the human," in which socio-economic processes and the dynamics of the Earth systems are no longer neatly separable. "Writing worlds," to return to James's metaphor, thus involves an inscription of human practices and activities on the nonhuman environment.

Yet, despite the "striking similarity" (James 2020a, 187) between writing storyworlds and (re)writing the planet's ecosystems, there are significant limits to that analogy, as James acknowledges. Think about narrative practices: when engaging with a story, regardless of the medium, audiences operate on the assumption that a human agent is responsible for the telling. The agent may be an individual author or storyteller (in literary and oral narrative), or may emerge from creative teamwork (for instance, in video games or TV series). Nevertheless, audiences tend to receive stories by ascribing human intentionality, even if—of course—not all aspects of the reception can be controlled by the authorial figure. So-called rhetorical narratology (Phelan 2017) and David Herman's (2013) stripe of cognitive narrative theory converge on this

idea that making sense of narrative means coordinating with a storyteller even when he or she is not physically co-present with the audience (as storytellers would be in face-to-face conversation). However, positing this kind of intentionality on a species scale is far more difficult. A complex tangle of human habits and political decisions over the course of the past decades (or centuries, on some accounts) have led to the current ecological crisis. But it seems wrong to say that climate change was deliberately *intended* by even the most selfish industrialists and oil magnates. Rather, environmental catastrophe is the unintended consequence of short-term thinking and the mindless exploitation of the planet's resources: it is a dramatic byproduct of capitalist greed rather than its goal. Ascribing intentionality to climate change is thus highly problematic: indeed, coming to terms with the climate crisis requires understanding its distributed nature and its vast spatio-temporal scale. Behavioral patterns on a large scale may produce catastrophic consequences elsewhere within the Earth system: a long history of burning coal in Europe's factories may cause devastating flooding in Bangladesh, for instance, or plastic discarded in the Pacific may contribute to the degradation of coral reefs thousands of miles away.

Just as climate change does not sit well with ordinary notions of intentionality, it resists commonsense ideas of individual agency. If the Anthropocene is the era of "humans writing worlds," who are the humans in question? One answer would be to point to humankind as a biological species, but (as has been argued multiple times) that view downplays major differences between, for example, the developed world and communities in the Global South whose contribution to global warming is negligible (despite being acutely vulnerable to its consequences). Another proposed answer shifts the focus from humanity to capitalism, turning the Anthropocene into a "Capitalocene" (Moore 2017). Still, it is debatable whether an abstract socio-economic system can be considered an agent in the standard sense of the word.

In sum, there is considerable tension between writing storyworlds and "writing" the world of the Anthropocene, and that tension has been the subject of numerous discussions in the environmental humanities and, more recently, within a strand of narrative theory known as "econarratology" (James's coinage; see James 2015; James and Morel 2020). The goal of this chapter is to account for this tension while exploring the confluence of storytelling practices and the discourse surrounding the Anthropocene in science, the humanities, and contemporary culture at large ("Anthropocene discourse" from now on). My premise is that this "era of the human" is inherently tellable, because narrative thrives on the conflicts and dramatic events—both actual and foreseeable—that the Anthropocene brings in its wake: ideological rifts between environmental activists, climate change skeptics, and the general public, as well as the increasing possibility (and reality, in some parts of the world) of environmental disaster. If, as argued by Herman (2009, 133–36), "world disruption" is closely bound up with narrative "worldmaking," then climate catastrophe—the destabilization of entire ecosystems—is certainly a potent attractor for storytelling. As we will see in the next section, the Anthropocene is often understood by riffing on a basic template, a sort of rags-to-riches story on a species scale: a protagonist, humanity, rises from the animal kingdom and takes on the role of a geological agent.[2] This straightforward narrativization of the current crisis is what I call the "Anthropocene protonarrative."

Yet this narrative construal of the Anthropocene does not take into consideration the tensions already mentioned above: primarily, the fact that anthropocentric notions of intentionality and agency, which underlie narrative practices, cannot be easily "scaled up" to the

[2] I lift the "template" metaphor from Herman and Vervaeck (2017). Their account of narrative negotiation is generally very relevant in this context, and has informed my discussion of the Anthropocene protonarrative in Caracciolo (2020a).

level of planetary processes. As a second step, then, I turn to arguments *against* simplistic narrativizations of the Anthropocene, explaining why facing up to the climate crisis involves embracing a plurality of stories and, perhaps, moving beyond certain established way of thinking about story, especially the conventions of realist fiction. More experimental anti-realist works, also within the novelistic tradition, hold particular promise in that regard. I discuss this claim in relation to contemporary literature that cross-fertilizes storytelling and nonnarrative genres and modes (for instance, the archive or the essay) in an effort to paint a more comprehensive and nuanced picture of our Anthropocenic moment. The works I examine display both formal innovation and keen awareness of the epistemological and ethical limitations of storytelling, warning against reductive uses of narrative. Finally, in the last section I offer a brief reading of *The Swan Book* (2016), a novel by Australian Aboriginal writer Alexis Wright, as a highly self-conscious exploration of the complex linkage between narrative and the Anthropocene. While my discussion in this chapter is limited to literary narrative (for pragmatic reasons), many of my claims can plausibly be extended to formally sophisticated stories in other media (from film to video games), which are also well positioned to capture the ethical and material complexity of the Anthropocene.

The Anthropocene from Protonarrative to Assemblage

From humble beginnings to a position of power: what transition could be more tellable? Countless narratives build on this basic scheme. The Anthropocene concept, as Crutzen formulated it, easily fits into the same template. Crutzen predicts that "mankind will remain a major environmental force for many millennia. A daunting task lies ahead for scientists and engineers to guide society towards environmentally sustainable management during the era of the Anthropocene" (2002, 23). The implication is that, for most of its history, humanity was *not*

an "environmental force," but a mere animal species among many, hardly more remarkable—from a geological perspective—than its evolutionary cousins in the primate family. At some point, though, things changed dramatically. Scientists debate the exact starting point of the Anthropocene: for some, including Crutzen, it coincides with the industrial revolution in the late 18th century; for others, it can be located earlier (the agricultural revolution) or later (the post-WWII period) in human history.[3] Whatever the exact cut-off point, this moment marked a highly significant shift in humanity's fortunes: human beings became unique in the animal kingdom for their ability to manipulate the environment on a planetary scale. This rise to a position of preeminence in the natural world involves enormous ethical responsibilities. Commenting on this "daunting task," Crutzen controversially suggests that "scientists and engineers" should be at the forefront of humanity as an "environmental force." This setup explains much of the Anthropocene concept's narrative appeal. While not explicitly formulated *as a story* by Crutzen, the concept becomes a productive protonarrative as soon as it brings into view a single protagonist (humanity) and an axiologically meaningful change of state (being elevated to a geological agent).

The latent narrativity of the Anthropocene has been frequently recognized by humanities scholars—typically, in a critical vein, and in opposition to Crutzen's science-centric rhetoric. In their incisive commentary, Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz discuss "a grand narrative of the Anthropocene that presents interactions between the human species and the Earth system" (2016, 56). This "grand narrative" or "Anthropocene protonarrative" (in my terminology) was first formulated by scientists like Crutzen and later embraced by the media. It is an extension of ideas of technological and scientific progress and follows a similarly linear,

[3] For more on the controversy surrounding the Anthropocene's inception, see Smith and Zeder (2013).

incremental logic (humanity's "promotion" to environmental force).[4] The protonarrative also involves a movement from lack of knowledge (the blundering humanity unwittingly destroying the environment for most of the 19th and 20th centuries) to awareness of environmental devastation (when the Anthropocene concept enters the scene). Read in this light, the Anthropocene becomes a planetary coming-of-age story that culminates, according to Crutzen, in "scientists and engineers" taking charge and steering humanity toward "environmentally sustainable management."

Yet, Bonneuil and Fressoz point out, this unifying protonarrative breaks down as soon as we examine it more closely. Importantly, rejecting or critiquing the protonarrative doesn't mean denying the underlying material realities of the Anthropocene—for instance, the anthropogenic nature of climate change, and the manifold environmental threats deriving from it. The critique only draws attention to the history of climate change, which largely coincides with capitalist and colonial exploitation, and resists the celebration of human mastery that is implicit in some versions of the Anthropocene concept. The undifferentiated concept of humanity in the protonarrative papers over major differences between developed countries, the developing world, and Indigenous communities. For individuals in the West, this is a convenient way of sweeping their historical and ethical accountability under the rug: foregrounding a vague notion of humanity obscures a history of environmental devastation driven by capitalist greed and violence perpetrated by Western colonial powers.[5]

Moreover, as Bonneuil and Fressoz also note, even in the West the debate surrounding the climate crisis reveals a far more differentiated narrative landscape than the protonarrative would

[4] Jean-François Lyotard (1984, xxiv) would call these notions of progress and technological mastery "metanarratives."

[5] See Crist (2013) for a sustained argument along these lines.

suggest. In particular, Bonneuil and Fressoz identify five narrative strands: "The (naturalist) official narrative that prevails today in the scientific and international arenas . . . , the post-nature and 'eco-modernist' narrative of a high-tech 'good Anthropocene' . . . , an eco-catastrophist narrative that envisions a collapse of industrial civilization and seeks local resilience, an eco-Marxist narrative in which the Anthropocene is better described as a 'Capitalocene' . . . and an eco-feminist one that relates male domination to the degrading of the Earth" (2016, 73; ellipses added). While the first two approaches to the climate crisis feed into the protonarrative evoked by Crutzen and other scientists, the other "narratives" (in Bonneuil and Fressoz's terminology) contradict and complicate the image of an undifferentiated humanity becoming a geological force.

In a narratological context, it is sensible to distinguish between full-fledged narratives—concrete and contextually bound instances of storytelling—and ideas that lend themselves to narrativization. The strands of environmental thinking described by Bonneuil and Fressoz fall into the latter category, because they possess a latent narrative quality: technology as a savior, or capitalism and patriarchal structures as the villains. Catastrophe itself spawns countless stories in both factual accounts and fiction (think about the pervasiveness of postapocalyptic fiction in contemporary culture). In short: even if they do not qualify as narrative in the strict sense, Bonneuil and Fressoz's competing construals of the Anthropocene bring along a vast narrative repertoire. Through the multiple tensions between capitalism, gender relations, the ever-present specter of cataclysm, and faith in scientific and technological progress, the Anthropocene is ripe for story. This take on the Anthropocene concept involves a significant reframing: rather than a unifying story of humanity assuming the role of a geological agent, Anthropocene discourse becomes an arena for the interpretive conflicts that arise with the ecological crisis. Where do we

locate the moral responsibilities for the current crisis? Is it legitimate to refer to a universal "humanity" given the uneven impact of climate change on well-off communities (mainly in the West) and on the much more vulnerable Global South? Facing similar questions, Pieter Vermeulen notes that the Anthropocene "becomes useful if we accept that it is inevitably a misnomer. It covers a makeshift assemblage of discourses, terms, protocols, and experiments" (2020, 8–9). After rejecting the protonarrative of humanity entering geological history, we start realizing—following Bonneuil and Fressoz—that this "makeshift assemblage" teems with narrative potential.

The question is, then: having established the incipient narrativity of much Anthropocene discourse, what are the creative possibilities of full-fledged narratives vis-à-vis the ecological crisis? Put otherwise, how can individual narratives make a useful intervention within the "makeshift assemblage" of Anthropocene discourse? One possibility is to deploy story strategically in order to oppose existing, dominant narratives. Such "counter-narratives" (see Bamberg and Andrews 2004) abound in environmentally engaged media and scholarship, and frequently tap into Bonneuil and Fressoz's eco-catastrophist, eco-Marxist, and eco-feminist discourses.

In Caracciolo (2020a) I analyze in light of proto- and counter-narratives a nonfiction book by American writer Nathaniel Rich, *Losing Earth*, which relates how the international community came close to a historic climate change agreement in the 1980s but eventually failed to reach a deal because of the opposition of the George H. W. Bush administration. Rich's journalism upends the view that the Anthropocene involves a movement from lack of awareness to science-mediated consciousness of humanity's impact on the planet. As Rich's narrative shows, concerns over greenhouse gas emissions far predate contemporary debates, yet scientific

awareness of the risks did not result in political determination to address them. However, while thoughtfully exposing the contradictions and responsibilities of the US government, Rich's account does not steer clear of statements that map Western nations—particularly the US—onto a species-wide "we": "We understood what failure would mean for coastlines, agricultural yield, mean temperatures, immigration patterns, and the world economy. But we did not allow ourselves to comprehend what failure might mean for us" (2019, 9). If, in some ways, Rich's book offers a counter-narrative to Crutzen's faith in the power of scientific knowledge to steer humankind toward sustainability, in other respects Rich falls into the same trap of universalizing statements. Ultimately, the narrative takes on a tragic form: it focuses on how "we" came close to effective change but then dramatically failed to enact it because of an original flaw in "our" nature (in the sense of Aristotle's "great error" or "hamartia," which is a central concept in his account of tragedy; see Aristotle 1995, 71). Adopting the rigid template of tragedy—in itself a legacy of Western cultural history—keeps Rich's journalism from doing justice to the complexity of the Anthropocene: effectively, the narrative merely swaps humanity with the US government in the story of the Anthropocene, casting the latter in the role of a villain.[6]

Other writers are more careful to avoid grand statements as they resist the mainstream construal of the Anthropocene. One particularly salient example can be found in a book by anthropologist Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015). An influential contribution to the environmental humanities, Tsing's study combines philosophical argumentation and ethnographic storytelling. After referencing the Anthropocene concept and paraphrasing it as "humans have made a mess of our planet" (19), Tsing changes tack and turns to a natural object, the matsutake mushroom. The book takes its cue from Japan's obsession with

[6] Hayden White (2005) captures this narrativization of historical processes and events under the heading of "emplotment."

this mushroom—considered a prized delicacy—and tells stories centering on its buyers and pickers around the world, many of them living in poverty and precarity. These micronarratives are interwoven with Tsing's essayistic discussion of global capitalism; their protagonist is not a human character but a fungus that is uniquely able to grow in blasted landscapes, by pooling resources with nearby pine trees. Tsing explains: "To follow matsutake guides us to possibilities of coexistence within environmental disturbance. . . . matsutake show one kind of collaborative survival" (4). This "collaborative survival" in the nonhuman world serves as a model for human resilience amid the "state and capitalist devastation of natural landscapes" (20).

Tsing's argument thus brings together two elements evoked by Bonneuil and Fressoz: a critique of the capitalist system and the imagination of catastrophe. The humble mushroom is the focus of this operation: the mushroom stories counter the aggrandizing scientific rhetoric of humanity becoming a geological agent, suggesting that the nonhuman world itself, and its stories, can offer inspiration in times of climate crisis. The very form of Tsing's discussion reflects the collapse of the Anthropocene protonarrative: rather than a single, overarching story (still present in Rich's journalistic rendering of the early climate change debate), Tsing foregrounds a *mosaic* of narratives revolving around the same material object. Switching metaphors from the visual to the auditory register, Tsing herself draws attention to what she calls the "polyphonic" (2015, 24) nature of her ethnographic storytelling: her multiple strands of story destabilize the linearity of the Anthropocene protonarrative. Indeed, Tsing remains confident in narrative's power to "know the world" (33): "a rush of troubled stories is the best way to tell about contaminated diversity," she argues (34).

This section started with a single, unifying narrative of the biological "anthropos" and led to a plurality of microstories inspired by the natural world's resilience. The Anthropocene makes

space for a plurality of stories that attempt to negotiate, with various degrees of awareness and complexity, the economic, cultural, and political challenges that define the climate crisis. Some of these stories, like those told in Tsing's book, clash explicitly with the protonarrative of humanity rising to the status of geological force, a protonarrative that appears to extend, problematically, traditional notions of scientific progress and human mastery. Yet it is possible to be even more radical than Tsing and question the usefulness of narrative meaning-making itself in the face of the Anthropocene. Perhaps even pointing to the *plurality* of Anthropocene narratives isn't enough to address the intricacies of the climate crisis: perhaps narrative itself (and especially narrative as we know it in the Western world) ought to come into question. In this chapter's final section, the sophisticated literary strategies of Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* will serve as an example of this challenge to storytelling. Before that, more has to be said on how climate change puts pressure on narrative.

Pushing the Narrative Envelope

While Anthropocene discourse is ripe for narrative, scholars in various fields have expressed skepticism over narrative's ability to capture the Anthropocene in full. One of the reasons for this skepticism is narrative's tendency to foreground human-scale concepts of agency and intentionality (as discussed in the introduction): to quote Monika Fludernik (1996, 13), narrative's "anthropomorphic bias" means that it favors scenarios of interaction between human (or at least human-like) characters. These scenarios are driven by mental states (desires and emotions), as Lisa Zunshine (2006) and others have shown. After all, narrative plays a central role in everyday intersubjectivity, allowing us to ascribe beliefs and intentions to other subjects (Bruner 1986; Hutto 2007). Even more elaborate, fictional stories such as those found in the realist novel tend to gravitate towards interactions among a limited set of characters—

interactions that involve a human-scale temporality and spatial setting and foreground individual subjectivity and agency. It is thus tempting to argue, from this perspective, that narrative struggles to capture a phenomenon as spatiotemporally distributed and abstract as climate change, which is not tied to any human individual's mind.

Pursuing a similar line of thinking, literary scholars discussing the Anthropocene have typically pointed to the limitations of the novel as the narrative genre *par excellence* in the contemporary cultural landscape. Amitav Ghosh famously argued in *The Great Derangement* that climate change mounts "peculiar forms of resistance . . . to what is now regarded as serious fiction" (2016, 9). By "serious fiction," Ghosh primarily means the realist novel, and his argument revolves around what he calls the "extreme improbability" of climate change—its unprecedented scale and barely imaginable consequences. Through its focus on the everyday and the verisimilar (especially in the domain of intersubjective relations), the realist novel is ill equipped to deal with climate improbability. Catastrophes, writes Ghosh, "waylay both the earth and its individual inhabitants at unpredictable intervals and in the most improbable ways" (20): to introduce such unforeseeable events in a novel would ruin the pleasures of a well-constructed plot.

Ghosh's pessimism has been disputed, because it rests on an untenable separation between serious fiction and "popular" genres such as science fiction (see, e.g., Heise 2018). As a provocation, however, Ghosh's discussion remains stimulating: it suggests that the many narratives that crisscross Anthropocene discourse may, in fact, fail to come to terms with the radical nature of the planetary changes we discuss under that heading. As we have seen in the previous section, the protonarrative of humanity becoming a geological agent is only an extension of earlier ideas of linear progress, and even a writer as sophisticated as Rich falls back,

in *Losing Earth*, on the relatively conventional template of tragedy. The narratives that make up Anthropocene discourse may be held back by this adherence to modes of storytelling typical of Western culture, including the realist novel.

In a different context, political scientist Zoltán Boldizsár Simon (2018) formulates a strikingly similar argument. Also building on Bonneuil and Fressoz's work, Simon contends that the sheer novelty of the Anthropocene makes it unsuitable for narrativization: "A politics for the Anthropocene, I believe, . . . begins with the realization that storytelling domesticates the Anthropocene predicament" (13). Such domestication is unwelcome, because it downplays the differences between the current predicament and earlier crises (for instance, the Cold War, which informs the imagination of climate change in important ways).[7] In a sense, imposing the form of the realist novel on climate change or turning failed climate change negotiations into a tragedy are also acts of domestication that reduce what Bonneuil and Fressoz call the "shock" of the Anthropocene, or what other commentators have called its inherent "weirdness" (Friedman 2007). By rendering the unfamiliar and improbable in terms of well-known genres, storytelling downplays the scale and complexity of the current predicament, with its unique tangle of capitalism, culture, science, and politics. In fields like science communication, where clarity and persuasion are key, there may well be good reasons for the strategic use of conventional narrative templates. Yet simplifying the Anthropocene—turning it into a linear narrative with a single, clear-cut protagonist and/or villain—means missing an important opportunity to convey its challenges to a broader audience. This is why there is merit in arguments, such as Ghosh's and Simon's, that point to the limitations of conventional narrative practices, which are not fully able

[7] Kohlmann (2014) discusses the common ground between the contemporary cultural imagination of the Anthropocene and earlier, Cold War-infused anxieties.

to capture the spatio-temporal scale of the Anthropocene and its resistance to conventional (Western) notions of individualistic agency.

One way of overcoming this obstacle is to evoke, as Tsing does, a plurality of stories. If the Anthropocene is—to use again Vermeulen's terminology—an "assemblage" of ideas and discourses, then only an assemblage of stories may do justice to it. Numerous contemporary writers are exploring this possibility: climate-change focused novels such as James Bradley's *Clade* (2017) and Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018) feature multiple narrative strands, thus channeling the surprising (and seemingly "improbable," to quote again Ghosh) interconnectedness of human lives in Anthropocenic times.[8] This is a literary equivalent to Tsing's "polyphonic" method: the episodic nature of these works puts pressure on the focused plotting that we associate with narrative in the novelistic tradition. The realist novel developed in the West to probe individual subjectivity and social relations within urban societies (Watt 1957). For that reason, it constitutes a largely anthropocentric practice whose representational conventions need to be challenged if narrative is to adequately evoke the scale of climate change and the global entanglement that underlies it. This entanglement is both material and ethical, and embraces human communities with different historical responsibilities towards climate change, but also nonhuman species and ecosystems that are being ravaged by the environmental crisis. The multiscalar and multidimensional nature of this crisis calls for forms of narrative representations that go beyond or disrupt individual, human-scale agency and linear sequentiality. This is what the literary (and, more generally, artistic) experimentation with narrative conventions is uniquely capable of achieving. As I argue in *Narrating the Mesh* (Caracciolo 2021), formal innovation can go a long way toward attuning narrative to the

[8] The scholarship on fiction that engages with the climate crisis—so-called climate fiction or cli-fi—is quite substantial, although mostly nonnarratological in nature. See Trexler (2015) and Bracke (2018).

challenges of the Anthropocene. An important caveat is that I am not suggesting that the realist novel should be completely sidelined: first, as James (2020b) contends persuasively, overturning certain narrative conventions requires understanding them, their limitations, and their complicities in anthropocentric ideologies. Second, there are undoubtedly multiple instances of realist fiction that do question anthropocentrism and offer useful resources for narrative vis-à-vis the climate crisis. However, by and large, the realist novel's privileging of individual subjectivity and human-scale interactions appears limiting when dealing with a phenomenon as abstract and diffuse as climate change.

At the same time, equating the novel and the *realist* novel, as Ghosh does, is problematic: the novel as a form is capacious enough (and has been capacious enough, throughout its history) to integrate more experimental, self-conscious techniques, or techniques that cross-pollinate Western narrative and non-Western traditions. Magical realism comes to mind, and Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*—which I discuss in the next section—has been read in that light (Holgate 2015). Likewise, genres like science fiction or "weird" fiction provide the novel with productive tools to disrupt the focus on human agency and subjectivity of conventional realism (see, e.g., Kara and Langill 2020).

In parallel with my argument here, James's "Anthropocene narrative theory" contemplates "various ideas and issues that we associate with our new geological epoch and envisages their possible narratological correspondents" (2020a, 185). These "narratological correspondents" are formally creative solutions that render the ethical and material intricacies of the Anthropocene, largely by pushing back against traditional templates as well as straightforward construals of the climate crisis.

Although James, like Tsing, expresses confidence in the power of storytelling, she acknowledges that these "narratological correspondents" often take us to the limits of narrative as a text type. The slow temporality of "geological strata, ice cores, and tree rings," for example, only displays "a minimal amount of narrativity" (2020a, 191), in James's words, because of the lack of human agents as well as the disproportion between the temporal scale of these processes and the human lifespan. An Anthropocene narrative theory also places emphasis on description, which has long been considered antithetical to narrative (in that narrative relates changes over time, while description is a static representation of an object, location, or person).[9] Indeed, some of the most promising engagements with the Anthropocene in contemporary fiction involve low narrativity or tend to hybridize narrative with other genres.

As an example, consider *The Great Bay* (2010) by Dale Pendell. This work, subtitled *Chronicles of the Collapse*, envisages dramatic changes to California's coastline as sea levels rise. The book's parts depict, in parallel, the cultural and geological evolution of California after the collapse of society as we know it. The exact time period covered by each chapter increases gradually: from the first decade after the catastrophe (Chapter 1) to half a century (Chapter 3), an entire century (Chapter 6), and even thousands of years in the later chapters. Although *The Great Bay* is paratextually labeled a "novel," it is an experimental work that defies the narrative continuity we associate with that Western genre. To begin with, there is no overarching plot or single protagonist: while the chapters do display a degree of narrativity, Pendell's work reads as a collection of documents drawn from disparate fictional sources, some of which are explicitly credited in the text (interviews, news articles, along with more sustained accounts of individual lives). The archive thus serves as the main model for the organization of Pendell's work, both

[9] See Herman (2002, 265–66) for an overview of the traditional opposition between narration and description; Herman concludes that the distinction between these text types is "fuzzy instead of sharp" (2002, 298).

resisting and supplanting narrative meaning-making. Indeed, the decentralized structure of *The Great Bay* directly opposes the Anthropocene protonarrative, with "humanity" as its sole protagonist. Like Tsing, Pendell builds on a plurality of narratives, but here the storytelling appears even more disjointed, because it does not advance a clear ideological agenda (the matsutake as a symbol of anti-capitalist resistance). As Alexa Weik von Mossner (2014) notes, this setup disrupts the reader's narrative interest by undercutting the possibility of empathetic identification with a human protagonist. Precisely through the combination of local narrativity and nonnarrative organization, Pendell's work offers "a grim reminder of the risks produced by what we have come to call the Anthropocene" (Weik von Mossner 2014, 215). The hybridization of story and the list-like form of an archive thus convey a more scientifically accurate and imaginatively rich idea of the catastrophic ramifications of the Anthropocene than an individual plot could, because the book registers changes that are wide-ranging in both space and time and uncoupled from a single character's subjectivity.

Elsewhere, it is the nonnarrative form of the essay that complicates storytelling and enriches its engagement with Anthropocenic themes. Another experimental work, *Bird Lovers, Backyard* (2010) by Thalia Field, is a case in point. The text begins with a question: "What is it exactly to perform philosophy?" (2010, 1). This first chapter is narrated, in the we-form, by a group of characters who "arrive at the food court ready to think" (1)—about the nature of philosophy, species extinction, and the pigeons who are taking over the mall.[10] Rich in irony and ambiguity, this chapter serves as a narrative frame to a book that meanders from famed zoologist Konrad Lorenz's Nazi sympathies to an Internet discussion group on how to get rid of an ant infestation. The we-narrators only reappear in the final chapter: they leave the food court and

[10] For more on we-narrative and the narratological issues it raises, see Bekhta's (2020) comprehensive treatment.

enter a museum-like "Hall of Evolution" where a crying baby serves as a symbolic reminder of the crisis humanity is facing. The essayistic form of the other chapters complicates and disrupts the progression of the frame story, revealing the ethical mire of a world reshaped, painfully and complexly, by human activity. In Brenda Shaughnessy's *The Octopus Museum* (2019), it is poetry to be hybridized with narrative, through a postapocalyptic frame story. The poems are presented as exhibits in a museum curated by octopi after humanity's downfall, offering an estranged perspective on what one of the section headings calls the "rituals of the late Anthropocene colony" (27).

In both of these contemporary works, the tension between narrative and nonnarrative forms becomes a springboard for exploring the many facets of the climate crisis. This strategy allows Field and Shaughnessy to sidestep the limitations of storytelling—especially in the tradition of the realist novel—while destabilizing the Anthropocene protonarrative. In the next section, I turn to another experimental work, *The Swan Book* by Alexis Wright, which holds a mirror up to the intricacies of the relationship between narrative and the Anthropocene, allowing me to illustrate and recap much of my discussion so far.

Storied Negotiations in *The Swan Book*

"Upstairs in my brain, there lives this kind of cut snake virus in its doll's house" (2016, 1) reads the first line of *The Swan Book*, from a "Prelude" titled "Ignis Fatuus." The "virus" is linked to mental illness, and to a sense of restlessness and "nostalgia for foreign things" (3) felt by the speaker, who is also—presumably—the novel's narrator.[11] Whoever this figure is, they are not a universal "anthropos" in charge of the nonhuman world. On the contrary, the narrator

[11] I will not pursue this line of reading in this chapter, but it is tempting to link this "virus" to the circulation of narrative itself, as Jane Gleeson-White (2013) does in a review of Wright's book.

blurs the human-nonhuman divide, as a mind steered by viral disease: "And so I travel, fired up with the fuel of inquiry about what it means to have a homeland, to travel further into strange and unknown lands covered with holy dust and orchards of precious small, sun-ripened fruit that are sometimes half destroyed by war, and at other times, slapped hard in the face by famine" (4). These travels unfold on a planetary stage, against a backdrop of global crises (war, famine). Only at the end of this section does the narrator settle on a "tinder-dry nimbus where I once felt a sense of belonging" (4)—an allusion to the Aboriginal Australia where most of Wright's novel is set. The narrator also announces: "This is the quest to regain sovereignty over my own brain" (3). The antecedent of the pronoun "this" remains ambiguous: if it refers to *The Swan Book* as a whole, the reader—after finishing the book—may well wonder whether the quest was successful. Just like the fidgety narrator of this prelude, Alexis Wright's narrative method is meandering at best: it does not establish "sovereignty" in the sense of authorial control, but rather cultivates the art of the detour, following the suggestions of the nonhuman world (the virus, but also the titular swans). The stable "anthropos" at the heart of the Anthropocene protonarrative is thus displaced and problematized from the outset.

This is not to say that *The Swan Book* has nothing in the way of a plot. The book's protagonist is Oblivia, an Australian Aboriginal girl raised by a European immigrant, Bella Donna (a character whose voice possibly resonates in the prelude). After a harrowing experience of rape at the hands of a group of local boys, Oblivia grows up in a postapocalyptic world shaped by climate change-related devastation: "cities, towns, homes, land, as well as animals and crops, were flattened and could be no more" (22). The lake that had long nourished Oblivia's people turns into a swamp, bringing the Aboriginal community to its knees. This calamity is accompanied by the mysterious appearance of a flock of black swans, who develop a connection

with the traumatized girl. This connection is jeopardized when Oblivia moves to an anonymous "southern city" (122) after being seduced by a character named Warren Finch. A calculating politician, Finch goes on to marry Oblivia and become Australia's first Aboriginal prime minister. Eventually, a period of unrest leads to Finch's assassination; Oblivia escapes from the city escorted by one of the swans: she returns to the swamp, which is still in the grip of a catastrophic drought.

This plot synopsis hardly does justice to the experience of reading the three hundred pages of *The Swan Book*, however. Wright's style is deliberately difficult and nonlinear: important plot developments are buried within sentences brimming with references—some of them familiar to a Western audience, others (especially allusions to Aboriginal culture) obscure and left unexplained. A number of plot elements and characters—most prominently perhaps, the swans—recur with the insistence of musical leitmotifs, but do not appear to advance the narrative in any meaningful way.[12] As argued by Ben Holgate (2015) in a postcolonial reading of Wright's work, this challenge to the narrative setup of the Western novel is deeply informed by Aboriginal mythology: the prose of *The Swan Book* is as fickle and unstable as the creatures of myth. The twist, however, is that Indigenous knowledge is not so much *narrated* here as alluded to in an oblique way, as in the book's ending: "It is a bit too hot and dry here [in Oblivia's swamp]. Jungku ngamba, burrangkunu-barri. We're sitting down in the heat now. It's really just sand-mountain country. Like desert! Maybe *Bujimala*, the Rainbow Serpent, will start bringing in those cyclones and funneling sand mountains into the place. Swans might come back. Who knows what madness will be calling them in the end?" (302; italics in the original). The stratification of references disrupts the continuity of narrative—whether in the Western tradition

[12] See Caracciolo (2020b) for more on how the swans resist symbolic and narratological readings.

of the novel, or in Indigenous mythology. The effect is that the audience's narrative meaning-making is both cued and challenged at every step of reading *The Swan Book*. We thus approach the limits of narrative—the place where temporal and causal sequentiality is sidelined and story folds into poetic rhythm, via the leitmotif-like repetition of certain ideas and phrases.[13]

This destabilization of storytelling is heightened by the self-reflexive foregrounding of narrative as a *theme*. I have already mentioned that Wright's style operates through leitmotif-like repetitions: one of these repeated patterns presents storytelling as a language that straddles the human-nonhuman divide. Sometimes inanimate objects become the source of narrative: "As all stories begin with once upon a time, so the old woman [Bella Donna] always began her story, while looking into the levitating crystal balls she juggled, as though all stories that ever existed originated from these objects" (21). More often than not, though, the stories are associated with the swans themselves. These stories are significant works and myths about swans—both Western and Indigenous—that Oblivia absorbs while being raised by a European immigrant, Bella Donna. But instead of being the mere *subject* of storytelling, the swans take on agency and even ownership over narrative: "When they were taken out to sea, the swans became morose from their own stories being pulled away from them" (71). Ultimately, if the swans' function in the plot of Wright's novel remains deeply enigmatic, it is because human language can only gesture toward "their own stories": any attempt to relate these stories directly would result in anthropocentric apprehension and distortion. Meanwhile, in the human domain, narrative is

[13] I refer here to Brian McHale's (2009) discussion of the relationship between narrative and what he calls—building on Rachel Blau DuPlessis's work—the "segmentivity" of poetry, which consists in its juxtaposition and elaboration of linguistic segments. In my reading of *The Swan Book*, these foregrounded "segments" would be elements and references that return periodically in the novel, such as the titular swans, without advancing the narrative.

presented as a means of affirming colonial power and patriarchal control, as in Warren Finch's attempts to manipulate his own life narrative—and Oblivia's—to pursue his political goals.

Narrative is thus a double-edged sword in *The Swan Book*, allowing respectful apprehension of otherness (in the case of Oblivia's relationship with the swans) but also becoming an instrument of oppression and obfuscation. Importantly, the ambiguity that emerges from the *discourse* surrounding narrative (what I have been calling the story leitmotif) goes hand in hand with Wright's evident unwillingness to give in fully to the pleasures of narrative sequentiality. Instead of being the sole object of novelistic writing, story—or, more accurately, stories in the plural—become the focus of sophisticated, and highly self-conscious, negotiations that involve the reader in a reexamination of narrative's cultural function. Just as the audience's narrative meaning-making is disrupted and problematized by the rhythmic flow of Wright's prose, the novel highlights the pitfalls of instrumental uses of story—but also its potential value in making contact with, and celebrating, the nonhuman world.

In this way, *The Swan Book* resonates profoundly with this chapter's discussion of narrative and the Anthropocene. The prelude, with its staging of an enigmatic, nonhuman-infected, world-traveling narrator, establishes the planetary dimension of the climate crisis but also steers away from an essentializing and Western-centric understanding of humankind as separate from the natural environment. The Indigenous mythology and knowledge that form Wright's cultural background pervade the book and play into its critique of a universal "anthropos." Through its skepticism over conventional novelistic plotting, *The Swan Book* enacts a distrust in linear accounts of the climate crisis. Instead, a mosaic of narratives comes to the fore—some of them evoked indirectly, others merely mentioned—and clusters around the black swans and the novel's protagonist. These stories are introduced by way of leitmotif-like

repetitions that recall the polyphonic method of Tsing's ethnographic storytelling. Wright's experimental work thus puts significant pressure on narrative and surveys its boundaries, particularly the fine line between novelistic writing and poetic expression. The book celebrates the power of environmental narrative but also warns against its instrumentalization, suggesting that multiperspectivism and formal as well as ethical complexity are fundamental to a productive engagement with the Anthropocene concept, and with the climate crisis more generally.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to come to grips with the complex relationship between narrative and the Anthropocene, the proposed name for the current geological epoch. Through its stakes and potentially devastating consequences, the Anthropocene is a high-level instance of "world disruption," in David Herman's (2009) terminology. This destabilizing element makes the concept uniquely suitable for narrativization. Indeed, the field of Anthropocene discourse teems with stories—some of them inchoate and schematic, some of them fully worked out as individual narratives in various media. A particularly salient narrative construal of the Anthropocene is what I have called the "protonarrative," which channels a radical change in human-nonhuman relations (the environmental crisis) and suggests that humankind has become a major player in geological history.

Yet there is an important sense in which these narrative engagements shortchange the crisis we are facing. The Anthropocene protonarrative foregrounds an undifferentiated, biologically grounded idea of humanity that effectively depoliticizes climate change by abstracting from historically specific responsibilities as well as enormous differences between wealthy societies in the West and underprivileged communities around the globe. Further, climate change is an

emergent, distributed phenomenon that raises enormous challenges for experientially based understanding, in that—while the consequences of climate change may be felt dramatically—climate change per se escapes everyday perception. This resistance, which has been the subject of much discussion in the environmental humanities, spells trouble for storytelling, a representational practice that favors social interactions within a human-scale world. The limitations of storytelling are particularly evident in the quintessentially Western genre of the realist novel, which—as argued by Ghosh and others—is geared toward a sense of probability that does not sit well with the profound disruptions introduced by climate change. By falling back on existing narrative templates, the many stories that gravitate around the Anthropocene may in fact fail to capture its significance and complexity.

The Anthropocene has a way of confronting narrative with its limitations. This realization clashes with widespread calls for story as a "solution" to the climate crisis, especially in the context of media discussions of so-called climate fiction (see, e.g., Ullrich 2015). While the strategic use of narrative has value in areas like science communication (Dahlstrom 2014), we need deeper cultural awareness of the biases created by narrativization. Perhaps we should not pin all our hopes on story, particularly if that involves reaffirming, more or less deliberately, conventional Western modes of practicing storytelling. The way out of this dilemma, as I have argued in this chapter, is to pay closer attention to experimental approaches to narrative in literary fiction as well as other artistic practices (although my focus here was on fiction). The novel as a form is capacious enough to embrace such experimentations, but that requires moving beyond the conventions of literary realism. Writers like Alexis Wright and the other authors mentioned in the chapter are addressing those limitations by way of formal innovations that cross-fertilize narrative with nonnarrative genres such as the essay and poetry. As my reading of

Wright's *The Swan Book* has demonstrated, these experimental works display a degree of self-reflexivity that serves as a warning against instrumental and reductive implementations of narrative in times of climate crisis. The current ecological predicament can only be conveyed by narratives that are able to match the distinctive complexity of the crisis, by deploying strategies that evoke the global, destabilizing, and ethically challenging nature of phenomena like climate change. Realist fiction, by being biased towards individual human subjectivity and agency, is often inadequate to the task, even if there is no doubt much to learn from its failures and shortcomings (James 2020b). To channel the complexity of the Anthropocene, which is both material and ethical, one needs to look at more experimental narrative practices that disrupt the representational conventions of realism in order to convey the nonlinear and spatiotemporally distributed nature of our ecological crisis.[14]

Artistic narrative (in prose and in other media) that problematizes the linearity of the Anthropocene protonarrative offers critical tools that can be helpful to a broad range of practices, from journalism to social media and science communication. When deployed critically and creatively, the formal patterns of story can shape and complexify the imagination of the climate crisis. As the recent rise of interest in econarratology (James and Morel 2020) suggests, this insight into the power of narrative form, and—crucially—into its limitations, puts narrative theory at the forefront of contemporary thinking on the Anthropocene.

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