



## Future readers: narrating the human in the Anthropocene

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### ABSTRACT

This essay argues that the growing awareness of anthropogenic climate change and of the possibility of human extinction has begun to alter the very function of narrative; understood as a mode of knowledge, and as a technology through which cultural knowledge is archived in the present, narrative no longer only serves as a way of (cognitively) organising and emplotting human experience, but also as a way of (affectively) apprehending the end of possible human life. The essay develops this argument through a discussion of one of the most popular tropes in the Anthropocene imagination: that of a future reader who, in an imagined future, reads the remains of contemporary existence. Drawing on an archive of contemporary and of popular science writing, the essay argues that this future reader takes two different disciplinary forms: as a historian who chronicles historical errors that she, unlike us, is able to appreciate, or as an archaeologist who will be left to read mankind's geological footprint after its extinction. While the former, historical mode conforms to a traditional use of narrative, the second, geological one points up the anxieties, desires, and uncertainties besetting the anticipation of human extinction - here routed through the imagining of a radically nonhermeneutic and nonhuman form of registration.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 4 November 2015; Accepted 7 December 2016

**KEYWORDS** Anthropocene; extinction; future memory; narrative; science; literature

### The forms and functions of Anthropocene narrative

When the word 'Anthropocene' in the subtitle of a book no longer prevents it from gaining a nomination for the Pulitzer Prize, as happened with Jedediah Purdy's *After Nature: A Politics of the Anthropocene*, it is safe to say that it has become entrenched as part of the cultural vocabulary; and when the 2015 Pulitzer nonfiction award ends up going to a book on species extinction, it is clear that the environmental concerns that the word captures have gained cultural currency.<sup>1</sup> If the term initially referred to the human impact on the geological and ecological make-up of the planet, and thus to developments such as climate change, overpopulation, deforestation, and species

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extinction, it has since come to encompass the many challenges that the ongoing destabilisation of the relations between nature and culture entails; for Timothy Clark, the term names ‘the new contexts and demands – cultural, ethical, aesthetic, philosophical and political – of environmental issues that are truly planetary in scale’.<sup>2</sup> As the introduction to this special issue explains, ‘truly planetary’ here means that customary strategies and vocabularies for mapping the globe will no longer quite do; for Clark, but also for critics like Jennifer Wenzel and Gayatri Spivak, the notion of the planetary destabilises ‘the hegemony of the global’ and names an inevitable remainder that disturbs the composure of all too human ways of apprehending the world;<sup>3</sup> a ‘truly planetary’ disturbance such as the Anthropocene then also affects the relations between different academic disciplines. In the field of critical theory, the collapse of ‘the age-old humanist distinction between human history and natural history’ has, roughly speaking, generated two lines of thinking about the future of the human:<sup>4</sup> one that in its embrace of speculative realisms, object-oriented ontologies, and other vibrant matters gleefully *lets go* of human distinctiveness, and one that instead focuses on ‘the radical agential force of humans on their environments’ and in that way *intensifies* the question of human responsibility and agency.<sup>5</sup> The difference is that between a principled posthumanism in which the human operates as one agent among others, on the one hand, and what Margaret Ronda has called ‘not posthumanism but humanism, with a vengeance’ on the other.<sup>6</sup>

These – as we will see, only apparently – opposed positions on human difference correspond to different expectations of how art and literature are to respond to the Anthropocene. As Timothy Clark has shown, thinkers like Timothy Morton – a self-professed object-oriented ontologist – promote an art that evokes the mismatch between the human and the natural agencies afflicting it; they prefer works whose ‘material and formal qualities ... come to displace and overwhelm’ customary artistic forms of expression and representation.<sup>7</sup> These works emphasise ‘disjunctiveness, a being-overwhelmed by contexts in which the human perceiver is deeply implicated but cannot hope to command or sometimes even to comprehend’.<sup>8</sup> Clark, who is very critical of the ethical and political credentials this position claims for itself, remarks that thinkers like Morton have a real problem with *narrative*: seemingly intrinsically connected to the all too human desire to make sense of things by sequencing them into patterns of action and attention, narrative seems fatally anthropocentric, and therefore out of sync with the nonhuman rhythms of the Anthropocene.<sup>9</sup> For this strand of Anthropocene thought, which here betrays its continuity with the ‘formal radicalism’ that characterises a still dominant trauma aesthetic,<sup>10</sup> or indeed postmodernist fiction more generally, narrative can only be condoned as ‘something to be interrupted, broken or questioned’,<sup>11</sup> and not promoted as a device that can meaningfully capture the altered human condition in the expanded spatiotemporal parameters of

the Anthropocene. It participates in what the introduction to this special issue identifies as a tendency to emphasise the ‘representational obstacles’ at the expense of the imaginative affordances of phenomena like climate change. Anthropocene reality, on this account, resists representation and imagination, and art and literature are called upon to evoke rather than resolve that blockage.

The first proper study of literary fictions of the Anthropocene – or, to be more precise, of climate change – Adam Trexler’s *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*,<sup>12</sup> bears out the intimate affinity between narrative and the human (an affinity that critics like Morton affirm by opposing both narrative and the human in the name of the same object-oriented reality). Trexler’s commanding survey of over 150 novels tracks the impact of climate change on the novel form. This impact is undeniable: ‘climate fiction has increasingly allowed nonhuman things to shape narrative’,<sup>13</sup> as they have ‘challenge[d] received literary functions, such as character, setting, milieu, class, time, and representation’.<sup>14</sup> The remarkable thing is that for Trexler, these pressures have never fatally rendered literary narrative inoperative;<sup>15</sup> even if ‘the narrative difficulties of the Anthropocene threaten to rupture the defining features of genre’,<sup>16</sup> the broader category of literary narrative, which encompasses such afflicted genres as the suspense novel, science fiction, or chiller fiction, remains sufficiently robust to be merely tweaked, never fatally disrupted. These nonhuman pressures demand ‘formal innovations of fiction’ – demands that, Trexler’s survey shows, seem to have been met in a significant wave of collective and popular – rather than rarified and avant-garde – innovation.<sup>17</sup>

Trexler’s commitment to the flexibility and resilience of narrative fiction bespeaks his persistent concern with human agency and responsibility; his book sees climate change fiction testify to the need for ‘political accountability and responsible organization’ in the present in order to ward off a radically diminished future;<sup>18</sup> narrative, for Trexler, should induce ‘a climate of abrupt action’.<sup>19</sup> This investment connects *Anthropocene Fictions* to the recent upsurge of fictions that imagine the end of the world, many of which Trexler analyses, and which most often evoke a ravaged future in order to serve as a warning for its present readers. These works generally hope to help pre-empt the future they imaginatively anticipate. The recent proliferation of dystopian and post-apocalyptic fictions typically operate by offering a frightening outlook into a future that might become the present; the representation of dystopia, on this understanding, serves as ‘a call to pursue its opposite’.<sup>20</sup> These fictions engage climate change, ecological devastation, and other contemporary threats in order to fuel audiences’ desire ‘to escape such a dark future’.<sup>21</sup> On these accounts, literary narrative has a role to play in safeguarding human life and instilling an awareness of a distinctive human agency and responsibility – the very thing that critics advocating non-narrative Anthropocene literature and art put under erasure.

Still, in spite of their very different takes on narrative and on the human, and thus on the *forms* of literature, these two positions move closer together when we consider the cultural work they assume literature to be doing – what they suppose literature’s *functions* to be. Both positions assume that literature can significantly affect human behaviour, inculcate attitudes that help human life navigate the altered relations between nature and culture, and ultimately inform ethical and political change. I will spend most of this essay theorising a form of narrative that brackets these assumptions of cultural agency and instead draws on the resources of literary narrative *not* to shape ethical and political action, but rather to begin to come to terms with the finitude of human life – as both (and inextricably) a biological species (what we can call a *life form*) and an assemblage of cultural forms (or *forms of life* – what anthropologist Stefan Helmreich defines as ‘those cultural, social, symbolic, and pragmatic ways of thinking and acting that organize human communities’).<sup>22</sup> By bracketing the ethical and political agency of narrative, I argue, this kind of narrative does *not* mobilise a form of life in order to perpetuate the human life form, but instead underlines the radical finitude of both the human life form and our forms of life – forms and ways of life that are, moreover, shared with other species. Somewhat flippantly, we can say that if the human exists as both a life form and an assemblage of forms of life, literature’s *life of forms* is one place where the tenuous but inextricable relations between these dimensions is negotiated.

So what are the presumed functions of literature in the Anthropocene? Significantly, Trexler is drawn to the work of Bruno Latour – whose actor-network theory is routinely associated with speculative realism and object-oriented ontology (even if Latour’s unconditional emphasis on relations somewhat controversially denies the existence of objects independently from their relations)<sup>23</sup> – when considering the ways climate fictions interact with other agents – audiences, bureaucracies, corporations, sciences. To avoid reducing literature’s role to the (relatively frivolous) one of fictionally elaborating scientific truths, Trexler reassembles the social as a confrontation of forces, in which ‘climate change novels are best understood as a force’ in their own right – a force ‘that interacts with climate change’;<sup>24</sup> these fictions function within ‘new networks of humans and nonhumans’ that are constitutive of scientific meaning, and they are vectors in circuits in which ‘scientific meaning is produced by circulation’;<sup>25</sup> climate change novels ‘construct’ the different circuits and loops in which scientific meaning is produced,<sup>26</sup> and they allow climate change to appear ‘through a complex, unstable negotiation among texts, readers, and things’.<sup>27</sup> In spite of his commitment to the affordances of narrative, then, Trexler does not tell a story of literature’s functioning in society, as if recognising that literary narrative now operates in a world that may not lend itself so easily to narrative organisation, and that demands a different social ontology. While this betrays a certain hesitation about the

precise socially formative role of narrative, it at the same time valorises literary narrative as (at least) a social agent among others.<sup>28</sup>

Such a commitment to literature's ethical and political agency also marks the object-oriented aesthetics that resists narrative. In spite of these aesthetics' apparently avant-garde credentials, which in any case overlook the (by now) conventionality of the formal radicalism these aesthetics promote, Timothy Clark has critically noted that they have been 'recuperated too hastily into ethical and cultural agendas one would have expected [them] to question'.<sup>29</sup> The work of Morton, for instance, presents 'an underdefined and mildly sentimental ethic of care arising from the knowledge of interconnection and interdependence' between human and nonhuman agents.<sup>30</sup> Even if they hold different positions on the affordances of narrative, the two prevalent tendencies in Anthropocene criticism share an ethical and political agenda, which focuses on the recalibration of the relations between human and non-human life, as well as a belief that literature has a non-negligible (if somewhat underdefined) role to play in furthering that agenda. It is that agenda and that belief that the use of narrative I theorise declines to share.

### **Narrative and the limits of human life**

Timothy Clark's recent *Ecocriticism on the Edge* helpfully shows that the relevance of literary form in inculcating an Anthropocene politics and ethics is too easily taken for granted in different strands of contemporary ecocriticism. What, he asks, 'if the kind of transformed imagination celebrated in this sort of cultural programme, this awareness of interconnection, could not be assumed to be an effective agent of change – in other words, *how far does a change in knowledge and imagination entail a change in environmentally destructive modes of life*'?<sup>31</sup> Far from dismissing such questions as merely rhetorical ones, Clark calls for a recognition of culture's 'marginality and weakness as a sphere of agency'.<sup>32</sup> Against a prevalent 'exaggerated sense of significant agency', Clark is committed to 'a chastening recognition of the limits of cultural representation as a force of change'.<sup>33</sup> Such an engagement with the limits of culture might paradoxically be appropriated as a strategy for coming to terms with the intensified recognition of species finitude that the Anthropocene has brought about. Following (and quoting) Adorno, Sianne Ngai has formulated this paradoxical privilege when she notes that 'bourgeois art's reflexive preoccupation with its *own* "powerlessness and superfluity in the empirical world" is precisely what makes it capable of theorizing ... powerlessness in a manner unrivalled by other forms of cultural praxis'.<sup>34</sup> Anthropocene narrative, on this account, has a particular purchase on the diminished planetary role of the human – of the role of the human, that is, in a world that can no longer be conceived as a globe but must be apprehended as a stubbornly nonhuman planet.

In this essay, I focus on one particular literary figure that makes this role visible in the Anthropocene imagination: that of a posthumous reader who remains to read the traces left by civilisation. Such a future reader – familiar from films like *The Age of Stupid* or *Wall-E*, popular science books like *The Collapse of Western Civilization* or *The Earth after Us*, or even, in a more rarified cultural niche, the ‘robot historian’ in Manuel Delanda’s *War in the Age of Intelligent Machines* – is ostensibly a narrative-enabling device: it provides a perspective from which the tale of ongoing human error can be narrated with the benefit of hypothetical hindsight.<sup>35</sup> This imagined retrospect supposedly not only affords an epistemological advantage, but also entails a call to action. The future reader is essentially a figure of what Greg Garrard has called ‘proleptic mourning’ – an imagining of the future as if it were already past.<sup>36</sup> For Garrard, the tense belonging to such proleptic mourning is that of the future perfect subjunctive, as it makes us ask: ‘what might we have done?’<sup>37</sup> This is, for instance, the logic informing Franny Armstrong and John Battsek’s 2009 documentary film *The Age of Stupid*, whose tagline reads ‘why didn’t we save ourselves when we had the chance?’ The movie is curated by a 2055 archivist, performed by Pete Postlethwaite, who looks back on early twenty-first century civilisation. At the end of the film, he asks: ‘So why did I build this archive? It’s a cautionary tale’ – a cautionary tale for ‘whoever, whatever, eventually finds this recording’, which is to say, also for the film’s contemporary viewers, for whom it is apparently not too late to be cautioned – for whom, that is, there still is supposed to be a chance.

My analysis of two contemporary future readers – one narrating Max Brooks’s *World War Z*, the other Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway’s *The Collapse of Western Civilization* – reads these works against the grain to suggest that narrative in the Anthropocene not only serves to generate knowledge or to appeal to the conscience of its audience but also marks a (largely disavowed) recognition of the *inability* of literature to help preserve human forms of life – and, more dramatically, human existence as a life form.<sup>38</sup> Building especially on the narratological work of Mark Currie, I argue that one of the (mostly overlooked) functions narrative serves at the current juncture is to begin facing up to the increasingly inescapable fact of human species finitude – the fact that human life will one day be no more than a deposit in the geological record. Rather than a call to change our forms of life so as to preserve the human life form, narrative is one of the places in which we, in Roy Scranton’s phrase, ‘learn to die in the Anthropocene’.<sup>39</sup> For Scranton, the hard truth is that ‘we have likely already passed the point where we could have done anything about it’; ‘We’re fucked. The only questions are how soon and how badly’.<sup>40</sup> Narratives, and especially narratives about the Anthropocene, are one place where the inescapability of those questions is registered rather than disavowed in the name of ethical and political action.

This focus on the end of human life should not be mistaken for a glib and studiously nihilistic indulging in the prospect of human species extinction. Greg Garrard has remarked that the ‘calculated callousness’ of what he calls ‘the disanthropic imagination’ – the imagining of a future world without humans – often has a ‘sado-dispassionate’ streak (the term is Teresa Brennan’s, and entered ecocritical discourse through the work of Australian eco-feminist Val Plumwood).<sup>41</sup> All too often, he notes, the imagining of a posthuman world ‘collapses into ordinary apocalypticism and ethical misanthropy’.<sup>42</sup> I argue that the serious concern with a posthumous reader, even if it intimates the end of human life, articulates human life as both a ‘matter of fact’ and a ‘matter of concern’;<sup>43</sup> by even bothering to engage narratively with the end of the species, I believe, it testifies to the impossibility of dispassionately surrendering human difference to a world without us. What is distinctive about these figurations of a posthumous reader is *not* their lack of concern with human life, but rather that they (unlike the authors of these works) do not imply an ethical or political programme for change; there is, in these works, no global solution to a planetary problem. Instead, and against their authors’ best intentions, they make narrative available as an occasion for coming to terms with finitude.

Ursula Heise has shown that the ways we talk about extinction is always irrevocably framed by cultural concerns, and are never just transcriptions of scientific insight. Engagements with species, she writes, ‘gain sociocultural traction to the extent that they become part of the stories that human communities tell about themselves’.<sup>44</sup> Yet what Simon Pooley calls ‘the deeply entangled relations of humans and all other living beings and ecosystems’ – the fact that, as Thom van Dooren notes, in the Anthropocene, every community is to some extent ‘a multispecies community’ – also means that extinction discourse always puts human forms of life at stake.<sup>45</sup> By bringing extinction discourse to bear on the prospect of human extinction, I argue, the works I analyse radicalise these concerns and also intimate the end of the human life form.

*World War Z* and *The Collapse of Western Civilization* end up repurposing narrative at a moment in which not only the relations between human and other life forms, but also, as I noted above, those between different scientific and humanistic disciplines are being reorganised. If scholars of literature and culture experience the Anthropocene as a moment when customary cultural and social categories break down, for the sciences, the realisation that their predictions and observations in no way automatically translate into direct policy is at least as critical; at a time when, in Naomi Oreskes’s words, ‘scientists’ attempts at communication were proving so conspicuously ineffective’,<sup>46</sup> it is not surprising to see historians of science like Oreskes and Conway turn to narrative fiction in a bid to gain critical purchase on the present. And while retrospective narration ‘gives you emotional distance’ and offers a way of

cognitively organising and emplotting human experience, I argue that this effort is complicated by a largely disavowed apprehension of the possible end of human life.<sup>47</sup> In this respect, it is relevant that contemporary figurations of the future reader – who is in itself, of course, nothing new, and can even be seen as constitutive of the overlapping genres of dystopian and science fiction – often oscillate between two disciplinary incarnations: that of a future historian and that of a future geologist – the former competently *interpreting* humanity's current failures, the latter typically dispassionately *reading* the record of its passing. If this opposition between the hermeneutical activity of a historian and the rigorously nonhermeneutic registrations of a geologist reproduces a reductive understanding of these forms of knowledge production (and it certainly does), these two guises yet reflect the disjunction that Dipesh Chakrabarty locates at the heart of human life in the Anthropocene: human life, for Chakrabarty, belongs 'at once to differently-scaled histories of the planet, of life and species, and of human societies', which brings on 'the challenge of having to think of human agency over multiple and incommensurate scales at once'.<sup>48</sup> More specifically, the slippage between a hermeneutic approach – which makes sense of human action as an overlapping set of *forms of life* – and a nonhermeneutic one – which leaves all forms of life aside, and even erases the human's status as a *life form* – points to the anxieties, uncertainties, and desires besetting the anticipation of human extinction and the human's reduction to a geological trace. It recognises that the human record will be read 'after the non-existence of humans' by nonhumans for whom the human intentions supposedly available to historians will no longer matter.<sup>49</sup>

Even more than the extinction of organisms that co-create our life worlds, the intimation of a future without humans deeply affects the ways we inhabit our current forms of life – it means, again in Roy Scranton's words, 'understanding that this civilization is already dead'.<sup>50</sup> Present actions are reconceived as the objects of future acts of reading; actions, in other words, become inscriptions that define the human record that will be read in a distant future. In a perceptive essay, Tobias Boes and Kate Marshall have noted that the Anthropocene is not just something we tell stories *about*, but something that is *actively* being defined by human storytelling: the Anthropocene

is not simply something that is written *about*; it is also something that is actively shaped and created through acts of human inscription: through topographical alterations, changes in the geologic and climatological records of our planet, and so on. But unlike other signatures, which ultimately bear a merely figurative relationship to the human essence that they putatively capture, the traces of ourselves that we inscribe upon the planet compel in us direct and literal changes.<sup>51</sup>

In the Anthropocene, acts of narration become exercises in becoming 'an imagined future memory'.<sup>52</sup> As Boes and Marshall also write, 'we might say that



our contemporary species-being expresses itself not in denotative speech acts but rather in performative interventions in which humankind functions as both subject and object' – in which humankind writes (itself as) its own record.<sup>53</sup> *World War Z* and *The Collapse of Western Civilization* discover that, far from mapping and comprehending the present through their acts of narration (which is their official project), their activity becomes part of the very present they aim to control – a present that will become the past of a future they cannot prevent.

### Reading collapse

So what different modes of reading are embodied by the figures of the future historian and the future geologist? *The Collapse of Western Civilization* presents a seemingly straightforward recent example of a future historian, yet in spite of the book's official message, this historian nevertheless morphs into an imagined geologist who dispassionately reads humanity's geological imprint. Published in 2014 by two eminent historians of science, Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway, *The Collapse* aims to convey the threat of climate change by having a historian narrate the collapse of life as we know it from the 'Second People's Republic of China' in 2393, where the historian looks back on the decline and fall of the West 300 years before – at the culmination of a period the book calls 'the Period of the Penumbra (1988–2093)'.<sup>54</sup> Apart from communicating scientific insights about the realities of climate change and informed estimations of its dramatic ecological and social consequences, the text also spends a lot of time explaining why it needs to invoke the device of a future historian. One of the present problems it diagnoses is the unravelling of the relation between knowledge and power; nowadays, knowledge no longer 'empowers its holder',<sup>55</sup> as the impact of scientific knowledge is threatened by a potent denial industry – the topic of Oreskes and Conway's successful 2010 book *Merchants of Doubt*.<sup>56</sup> Yet at other moments, the text makes the more interesting point that there is also something inherent in the protocols of science – rather than in its translation into policy – that sets present civilisation on its way to collapse. The problem is double: first, science operates by an 'excessively stringent standard for accepting claims of any kind, even those involving imminent threats' – a standard of certainty that blinds it even to what is highly probable (something like anthropogenic climate change);<sup>57</sup> second, scientists are 'trained as specialists focused on specific aspects of the atmosphere, hydrosphere, cryosphere, or biosphere', and thus find no way to articulate the broad, slow, incremental, and interacting patterns that make up climate change.<sup>58</sup>

The disabling rigid focus of science explains why Oreskes and Conway adopt a literary device, which allows them to do what literature, and especially the form of the novel, has, in a sense, always done: narrate things that are not

certain – that are not even true, but that are still credible or plausible – in ways that articulate different spheres of knowledge – scientific, social, as well as psychological – into a coherent pattern. This is what the device of the future historian ostensibly aims to deliver: a lucid reading of the dynamics of contemporary culture that offers an insight only available in hindsight. This might also explain the geographic shift from the USA to China – as an imagining of a *different* globalisation, which thereby couches a truly planetary crisis in global terms, or a geological upheaval in geopolitical terms that are, as we will see, insufficient for that crisis. The short text contains an extensive ‘Lexicon of Archaic Terms’, which also features the fictional entry called ‘synthetic-failure paleoanalysis’.<sup>59</sup> ‘Synthetic-failure paleoanalysis’ is a fictional scientific discipline that, we read, aims to understand ‘past failure, specifically by understanding the interactions (or synthesis) of social, physical, and biological systems’.<sup>60</sup> Thanks to the device of the posthumous reader, *The Collapse* can present itself as an instance of such synthetic understanding. Crucially, understanding is here directly related to the possibility of narrative. As we will see, this is not the only epistemological mode the text engages.

*The Collapse of Western Civilization* mobilises the future historian as a device that enables a superior reading of the present; in a way, of course, that is what dystopian fiction generally does. Yet *The Collapse* also wants to be more than just a dystopian fiction – it also wants to hold on to the authority of science (Oreskes and Conway call the book a work of ‘science-based fiction’). It does so, most obviously, by including four maps, which show the difference in sea levels between the years 2000 and 2300 in four iconic drowning sites – the Netherlands, Bangladesh, New York, and Florida. Importantly, these maps do not participate in the text’s synthesising efforts; they do not contribute to the complex multiple causalities it aims to map, as they only show observable effects, not causes. Instead, I argue, and in spite of their undeniable anthropocentric nature (featuring as they do territorial borders, place names, and an implicitly human scale, only to drive home the imminent erasure of human forms of life), they imply a different kind of future reader – one tracking the earth with a purely nonhermeneutical, noninterpretive gaze; this imagined reader cannot gauge human intention or design, but only record and map the difference between two different data points, or two different geological states of affairs – that pertaining in 2000 and that in 2300. One way to capture this movement is to note that the future historian here morphs into a kind of future geologist, who registers human life as, in Claire Colebrook’s words, ‘a certain “mark” that would be singular and would designate a concrete event and nothing more’.<sup>61</sup> This slippage in the text activates a different mode of reading – one that does not, like the historian, understand *forms of life* in light of their fateful failures, but that rather reads the record of extinct *life forms* that are inescapably immortalised through their geological inscription – ‘made immortal, as a trace preserved forever in the rock’.<sup>62</sup>

If Oreskes and Conway's book officially presents human life as a purposive if somewhat dysfunctional form of life, it unwittingly also raises the spectre of human life as a layer in the geological record; it presents life as a spent geological force akin to volcanoes, oceans, and carbon – a force that is planetary rather than (merely) global. In spite of its humanist intentions, *The Collapse* discovers that “man” is no longer a rational animal ... but is instead something like a geological event'.<sup>63</sup> The four maps that interrupt (rather than illustrate) the narrative serve, in Bronislaw Szerszynski's words, as 'a reminder of our incipient minerality'; they point to 'a becoming-mineral, to be contemplated by the geologist-to-come'.<sup>64</sup> Instead of just calling on present human forms of life to adapt in order to perpetuate themselves as life forms, *The Collapse* radically disjoins the concept of the human: human life is not only a form of life striving to *understand* and perpetuate itself, but it also discovers 'that human existence on the planet *will be readable*, after the non-existence of humans'.<sup>65</sup> If Oreskes and Conway turn to narrative to articulate scientific insights as human concerns, they end up redefining the very concept of the human as also including a dimension that both *cannot be saved* (as its demise is all but inevitable) and, perhaps more dramatically, *does not need to be saved* (as it will inevitably survive itself as a geological trace). Their use of narrative is marked by this affectively overdetermined posthumous dimension, and it makes narrative something more than a cognitive device that delivers knowledge and insight: an affective, even therapeutic reckoning with species finitude.

We encounter a similar slippage in Max Brooks's 2006 novel *World War Z*, which is subtitled *An Oral History of the Zombie War*. The book deals with the aftermath of a zombie epidemic, whose transnational scope and whose concern with the limits of the human qualify it as an Anthropocene fiction.<sup>66</sup> The book mainly consists of juxtaposed testimonies of an international array of survivors of a near-future zombie war; officially, the book is committed to the imagining of a transnational community that has somehow managed to overcome a global crisis (and this echoes *The Collapse's* imagining of a future Chinese globalisation; in *World War Z*, events originating in China trigger the spread of the zombie virus); in practice, as we will see, it will intimate that a truly planetary problematic resists global solutions. Throughout the book, the voice of the narrator is hardly present beyond providing headnotes to the different storytellers and occasional questions and prompts. Still, the narrator's short address to the reader in the book's introduction brings it close to the humanising concerns of Oreskes and Conway. The unnamed narrator informs the reader that the book she is reading emerges out of a disciplinary conflict between the narrator 'and the chairperson of the United Nation's Postwar Commission Report' for whom the narrator used to work.<sup>67</sup> The oral histories we are given to read were filtered out of the final report because they offered feelings and opinions that

interfered with the report's commitment to objectivity – to 'clear facts and figures, unclouded by the human factor'.<sup>68</sup> Throughout the novel, the narrator mutes his own voice in order to allow the testimonies to be heard and assert the difference between 'the human factor' and what the narrator calls 'the creatures that almost caused our extinction'.<sup>69</sup> The novel clearly links the elision of the human factor to moral brutalisation and dehumanisation – a process that spreads from the undead to the humans that mercilessly fight them. The clearest example is the so-called 'Redeker Plan': conceived in apartheid South Africa, the plan provides for the survival of a privileged minority through the calculated sacrifice of the rest of the community.<sup>70</sup> Even if the novel's use of a dispersed set of limited perspectives does not offer a clear overview of how the zombie war was eventually won – in that respect, but not in terms of its commitment to the link between the human and narrative, *World War Z* is different from *The Collapse* – the novel strongly suggests that this plan was adopted to manage the zombie crisis in large parts of the world. This is but one example of how the novel, as Steven Pokornowski has remarked, associates dehumanisation with 'emotional closure, a politically necessitated foreclosing of the ethical that has deeply troubling implications', and it explains the novel's investment in narrative as a humanising counterforce.<sup>71</sup>

The narrator, in other words, dons the self-effacing guise of an oral historian in order to let narrative do its humanising work; he notes that he 'tried to maintain as invisible a presence as possible'.<sup>72</sup> Yet as the disciplinary struggle that frames this narrative makes clear, this superior understanding shades into a more radically posthumous perspective; the oral history we read is a leftover from a compilation of 'cold, hard data' that 'would allow future generations to study the events of that apocalyptic decade without being influenced by "the human factor"'.<sup>73</sup> The problem with this dispassionate approach, according to the narrator, is that future generations might not 'care ... for chronologies and casualty statistics'; they might give in to 'personal detachment'; they might forget about the human factor, which is 'the only true difference' between humans and zombies (even if the novel, as I have noted, significantly portrays the gradual erosion of that difference).<sup>74</sup> The narrator quite precisely understands narrative as a device to ward off carelessness, detachment, and indifference in future readers; it aims to ward off, that is, the spectre of a reader who looks back on human life as a mere mark, a mere event that can be recorded and processed as 'cold, hard data' and nothing more.

Of course, it is not particularly surprising that a zombie novel is concerned with the incipient nonhumanity of human life; what is more significant is that *World War Z* routes its 'bioinsecurity aesthetic' through a disciplinary division similar to that of Oreskes and Conway's popular science writing.<sup>75</sup> Both texts assert the humanising powers of narrative, while raising the spectre of human life's looming reduction to a mark in the geological record, there to be recorded

by a device that might not be human. Even as it is narrating itself into significance, human life, in the Anthropocene, simultaneously seems to be training itself into a realisation that it will ‘one day be perceived as nothing more than a geological scar’.<sup>76</sup> To repeat, what is distinctive about these instances is *not* that they dispassionately abandon human life to the reality of its coming extinction; it is more accurate to say that they deploy narrative to affirm the continuing value of human life, but find that commitment shadowed by the spectre of a radically nonhuman future – a future that, because it is a present future, also affects our apprehension of the status of human life forms, and of the life forms humans share with nonhuman others. Anthropocene narrative, I argue, has begun to train us in a different apprehension of human life.

### **Narrative and the nonhuman future**

So what happens to narrative when it is no longer only a device to contest or compound our understanding of the present? What is narrative when its humanising work also raises the ‘spectre of the *human as fossil to come*’?<sup>77</sup> To address this question, I turn to the work of narrative theorist Mark Currie. In the last decade or so, and especially in his book *About Time*, Currie has theorised narrative as a practice that trains its readers in apprehending the present as constitutively divorced from itself, and in realising that the present is always also the object of a future memory. For Currie, ‘fiction has been one of the places in which a new experience of time has been rehearsed, developed and expressed’.<sup>78</sup> Literary narrative has a privileged relation to this conception of time because of the peculiar temporality of reading an open-ended story that has already been written down (and is thus simultaneously anything but open-ended); when reading a novel, or another work of narrative fiction, readers are invited to anticipate an unknown, and to that extent open, future – the part of the story they have not read yet – but as this story, and this supposedly open future, is already written at the time the reader starts reading the novel, it is also radically closed: ‘in life the future does not exist yet, but in narrative fiction, it does’.<sup>79</sup> The result of this paradox is that everything the reader reads in narrative fiction is read in light of what it will come to mean, and that every present experience is reconceived as always also the object of a future memory. While this is an inherent feature of narrative fiction, and even of everything that is written (or even filmed),<sup>80</sup> it has become inescapable in twentieth-century literature, as flash forwards, flashbacks, and other anachronic devices foreground this feature and produce ‘a generalized future orientation’ that empties the present of its inherent significance.<sup>81</sup> The result, for Currie, is not only a presentification of the past – an effect that has customarily been associated with the particular immersive and affective power of

literary narrative – but also a ‘depresentification’ of lived experience;<sup>82</sup> this results in a tendency to inhabit the present as always under erasure, as primarily the object of a future memory.

The particular temporality pertaining to fictional narrative ‘installs in the present a temporal self-distance’.<sup>83</sup> And as ‘the reading of fictional narratives is a kind of preparation for and repetition of the continuous anticipation that takes place in non-fictional life’,<sup>84</sup> narrative fiction can serve as a training ground for a conception of life that is shadowed by its future fate as mere data, as a mere archive, as subject to a nonhuman gaze; it ‘makes us live life as if it weren’t present’.<sup>85</sup> Narrative, under these conditions, is driven by a particular ‘archive fever’ – ‘the frenzied archiving and recording of contemporary social life which transforms the present into the past by anticipating its memory’.<sup>86</sup> When Currie notes that ‘the reading of narrative fiction ... robs us of the present in the sense that it encourages us to imagine looking back on it’,<sup>87</sup> it becomes possible to see the Anthropocene prospect of species extinction as heralding an *intensification* of such depresentification; what I am suggesting is that in the Anthropocene, anachronic devices such as imagined future readers help apprehend *a more radically depresentified experience*: not just an experience that is *also* the object of a future memory, but one that will one day *only* be an object of memory, as the form of life that experienced it has ceased to exist. Indeed, it is not even clear whether this future registration will count as a full-fledged memory at all; here also, the planetary nature of the Anthropocene – which, as the introduction to this special issue notes, not only points to spatial but also to temporal disturbances – destabilises all too humanist understandings of a notion such as memory and rather intimates the cold, depopulated prospect of a mute archive. Narrative, in this expanded spatiotemporal framework, not only develops and expresses a sense that the present is the object of a future memory, it also conveys a sense that the form of life experiencing this present might not be the one in control of the afterlife of its forms. In the early twenty-first century, in other words, narrative has become one of the places in which human life, even while it tries to make sense of its existence, rehearses the inevitability of its extinction, as well as its posthumous readability. Even as works like *World War Z* and *The Collapse of Western Civilization* officially aim to make sense of our present by narrating it from a different, but still human, future, the narrative mode they adopt and the sense of decline they convey congeal into the intimation of an even more different and decidedly nonhuman future. These narratives make it possible ‘to think and perceive *as if* our world would be readable in the absence of what we now take to be readers’.<sup>88</sup> They are sustained exercises in abandoning human life to a geological gaze that is rigorously uninterested in understanding human exceptionality.

‘To think and perceive *as if*’: this conception of narrative sunders our experience of the present, and locates a radically nonhuman dimension at

the heart of present forms of life. It is very different from Garrard's counterfactual 'what might we have done?': rather than leaving room for an alternative future, it reminds the present that the future is less open-ended than it might have hoped. The oscillation between two modes of reading and two modes of futurity in Anthropocene fictions reminds human life that it is also a life form constitutively entwined with other life forms and exposed to the prospect of its own finitude – an insight that is endemic in all extinction discourse; it recalls what Kathryn Yusoff has called a 'geological dimension of subjectivity as immanent yet unspoken within the human'.<sup>89</sup> For Yusoff, 'subjectivity always contains both an anterior and interior nonhuman excess', and aesthetic constructions (including narratives) hold the power to allow 'a passage into the radically incommensurate time of the geologic' – the 'mineralogical dimension of human composition'.<sup>90</sup> This recognition of a nonhuman dimension at the heart of human life makes the imagined future readers of Anthropocene fiction figures of what I have been calling a truly planetary, rather than a merely global, future memory. For Jennifer Wenzel, the term 'planetary' generally 'aim[s] to reveal and undermine the hegemony of the global' and offer possibilities for 'thinking totality otherwise ... a better kind of borderlessness'.<sup>91</sup> For Eugene Thacker, the dimension of reality he calls the Planet is, unlike the Earth and the World, simply 'the world-without-us' – a reality that rigorously resists phenomenal experience or scientific mapping, but can only be intimated obliquely 'in the very fissures, lapses, or lacunae in the World and the Earth'.<sup>92</sup> The figuration of future readers, I have argued, is one way to open such gaps. Minding these gaps involves what Timothy Clark has called abandoning the strategic overestimation of the activist force of the literary and accepting 'a chastening recognition of the limits of cultural representation as a force of change' – if only because a denial of those limits will only hasten our confrontation with them.<sup>93</sup>

## Notes

1. Jedediah Purdy, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York, NY: Henry Holt, 2014).
2. Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 2.
3. Jennifer Wenzel, 'Planet vs. Globe', *English Language Notes*, 52 (2014), pp. 19–30, p. 21.
4. Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Climate of History: Four Theses', *Critical Inquiry*, 35 (2009), pp. 197–222, p. 201.
5. Margaret Ronda, 'Mourning and Melancholia in the Anthropocene', *Post45* (2013), n.p.
6. *Ibid.*, n.p.
7. Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, p. 183.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 184.

9. Ibid., p. 187.
10. For the best analysis of the (by now paradoxically fully conventionalised) formal radicalism of most trauma fiction, see Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), pp. 87–105. For the relationship between trauma and the form of anticipatory memory I explore in the rest of this article, see E. Ann Kaplan, *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015). Kaplan's cultural studies approach to how the proliferation of dystopian fictions bespeaks a cultural anxiety over the future does not interrogate the categories of culture and of the human, and this unquestioned reliance on the human is reinforced by her focus on the clinical category of trauma. As this essay does situate the imagining of nonhuman futures in the context of posthuman thought (which Kaplan explicitly rejects), I have decided to sidestep the (inevitably humanising) category of trauma.
11. Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, p. 187.
12. Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015).
13. Ibid., p. 26.
14. Ibid., p. 16.
15. See *ibid.*, p. 171.
16. Ibid., p. 14.
17. Ibid., pp. 24 and 13.
18. Ibid., p. 103.
19. Ibid., p. 169.
20. Dale Knickerbocker, 'Apocalypse, Utopia, and Dystopia: Old Paradigms Meet a New Millennium', *Extrapolation*, 51 (2010), pp. 345–57, p. 349.
21. Raffaella Baccolini, 'The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction', *PMLA*, 119 (2004), pp. 518–21, p. 520.
22. Stefan Helmreich, *Alien Ocean: Anthropological Voyages in Microbial Seas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), p. 6. Thom van Dooren helpfully underlines that the notion of 'forms of life' also applies to 'other-than-human "life forms"' as he considers 'birds (and other organisms) as life forms *with* a form or way of life'. Thom van Dooren, *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016), pp. 8–9.
23. The most famous case for Latour as 'a pioneer of object-oriented philosophy' remains Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: Re.press, 2009), pp. 151–228. See also Peter Gratton, *Speculative Realism: Problems and Prospects* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), pp. 90–91.
24. Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions*, p. 35.
25. Ibid., pp. 57 and 59.
26. See *ibid.*, pp. 59–62.
27. Ibid., p. 74.
28. Trexler's move here recalls Caroline Levine's recent book *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, which reimagines the interface between literature and the world as a matter of colliding, overlapping, and interacting forms – understood as 'an arrangement of elements – an ordering, patterning, or shaping' that applies both to literary works and to social gestalts. While this broader definition of form allows Levine to affirm the reciprocal relations between literature and the social world, it also conveniently allows her to



- sidestep the question of literature's precise worldly clout. What remains is a commitment to, rather than an analysis of, literature's worldliness. Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Providence: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 3.
29. Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, p. 188.
  30. *Ibid.*, p. 188.
  31. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
  32. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
  33. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
  34. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 3.
  35. *The Age of Stupid*, directed by Franny Armstrong (London: Spanner Films, 2009), Film; *Wall-E*, directed by Andrew Stanton (Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios, 2008), Film; Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2014); Jan Zalasiewicz, *The Earth after Us: What Legacy will Humans Leave in the Rocks?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Manuel Delanda, *War in the Age of Intelligent Machines* (New York, NY: Zone Books, 1991).
  36. Greg Garrard, 'Climate Change and the Art of Memory', *Thememorynetwork.net*, 18 March 2014, Audio.
  37. *Ibid.*
  38. Max Brooks, *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War* (New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 2006).
  39. Roy Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights, 2015).
  40. *Ibid.*, pp. 17 and 16.
  41. Greg Garrard, 'World without Us: Some Types of Disanthropy', *Substance*, 41 (2007), pp. 40–60, pp. 44–5. Teresa Brennan coins the term 'sadodispassionate' to capture 'the negative aggressive emotions that imbue objectifying reason', while Val Plumwood capitalises on the term to explain the role of rationalist and scientific disengagement as 'sado-dispassionate practice' in furthering an ecological crisis. Teresa Brennan, *History after Lacan* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 72; Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2002), esp. pp. 22, 36, and 41–5.
  42. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
  43. See Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry*, 30 (2004), pp. 225–48.
  44. Ursula Heise, *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 2015), p. 5.
  45. Simon Pooley, 'Endangered', *Environmental Humanities*, 7 (2015), pp. 259–63, p. 262; Van Dooren, *Flight Ways*, p. 5. For how the entanglement of human and nonhuman life forms in ecological communities is affected by the notion of extinction, see Mick Smith, 'Ecological Community, the Sense of the World, and Senseless Extinction', *Environmental Humanities*, 2 (2013), pp. 21–41.
  46. Oreskes and Conway, *The Collapse of Western Civilization*, p. 63.
  47. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
  48. Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change', *New Literary History*, 43 (2012), pp. 1–18, pp. 14 and 1.
  49. Claire Colebrook, 'Archiviolithic: The Anthropocene and the Hetero-Archive', *Derrida Today*, 7 (2014), pp. 21–43, p. 34.

50. Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, p. 23.
51. Tobias Boes and Kate Marshall, 'Writing the Anthropocene: An Introduction', *Minnesota Review*, 83 (2014), pp. 60–72, p. 64.
52. Sebastian Groes, "'The Unbearable Lightness of Being Green': Climate Change and the Art of Memory', *Thememorynetwork.net*, 3 February 2014, n.p.
53. Boes and Marshall, 'Writing the Anthropocene', p. 64.
54. Oreskes and Conway, *The Collapse of Western Civilization*, p. x.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
56. Oreskes and Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010).
57. Oreskes and Conway, *The Collapse of Western Civilization*, p. 16.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
59. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
60. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
61. Colebrook, 'Archivolithic', p. 22.
62. Bronislaw Szerszynski, 'The End of the End of Nature: The Anthropocene and the Fate of the Human', *Oxford Literary Review*, 34 (2012), pp. 165–84, p. 180.
63. Claire Colebrook, 'Not Symbiosis, Not Now: Why Anthropogenic Change is Not Really Human', *Oxford Literary Review*, 34 (2012), pp. 185–208, p. 188.
64. Szerszynski, 'The End of the End of Nature', pp. 181 and 179.
65. Colebrook, 'Archivolithic', p. 34.
66. See Steven Pokornowski, 'Insecure Lives: Zombies, Global Health, and the Totalitarianism of Generalization', *Literature and Medicine*, 31 (2013), pp. 216–34.
67. Brooks, *World War Z*, p. 1.
68. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
69. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
70. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
71. Pokornowski, 'Insecure Lives', p. 226.
72. Brooks, *World War Z*, p. 3.
73. *Ibid.*, pp. 1–2.
74. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
75. Pokornowski, 'Insecure Lives', p. 224.
76. Colebrook, 'Archivolithic', p. 25.
77. Kathryn Yusoff, 'Geologic Life: Prehistory, Climate, Futures in the Anthropocene', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 31 (2013), pp. 779–95, p. 782.
78. Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction, and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 6.
79. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
80. See *ibid.*, pp. 18 and 20.
81. *Ibid.*, pp. 6 and 22.
82. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
83. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
84. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
85. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
86. *Ibid.*, p. 10. For the Anthropocene and archive fever, see also Colebrook, 'Archivolithic', pp. 36–7.
87. Currie, *About Time*, p. 30.

88. Colebrook, 'Archivolithic', p. 34.
89. Yusoff, 'Geologic Life', p. 789.
90. Ibid., p. 779.
91. Wenzel, 'Planet vs. Globe', p. 21.
92. Thacker, *In the Dust of this Planet: Horror of Philosophy* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2011), Vol. 1, p. 8.
93. Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, p. 21.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.