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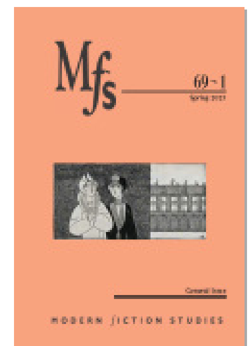

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Frankenstein's Monster Goes West: Hernan Diaz's *In the Distance*, Cli-Fi, and the Literature of Limitation

Pieter Vermeulen

In Hernan Diaz's 2017 novel *In the Distance*, the Swedish farm boy Håkan Söderström sets out to emigrate to New York, only to arrive (via Portsmouth and Buenos Aires) on the American West Coast. Håkan (called the Hawk in the new country) spends the middle decades of the nineteenth century roaming and eventually burrowing in the American West. Initially searching for his brother, whom he has lost on his way to the United States and whom he believes to be in New York, Håkan later withdraws from human contact after the two people he loves are killed. At the end of the novel, an aged Håkan finally comes out of hiding and joins a trapping mission to the "new territory" (250) of Alaska—which dates the end of the story to the period following the 1867 Alaska Purchase. When the ship that should bring the expedition there gets stuck in the ice, Håkan decides to set out further west as, thanks to the solid ice, he "may be able to walk over the sea . . . a straight line west. To Sweden" (256). The final words of the novel see him "set off into the whiteness, toward the sinking sun."

Walking from Alaska to Sweden sounds ambitious, but doing so was more plausible in the novel's mid-nineteenth-century setting than

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in the climate-changed world in which *In the Distance* is published. To walk from Alaska to Siberia, one must cross the Bering Strait, which is badly afflicted by dramatically rising Arctic temperatures. In 2018, NASA reported "unprecedented low sea ice in the Bering Sea" ("Unprecedented") as the sea ice surface was about ten percent of normal; one year later, that unprecedented situation turned into a precedent for more permanent diminishments, as "2019 just missed eclipsing the record set in 2018." One researcher notes that "as a scientist, it's fascinating to see our predictions coming true . . . As a human being, it's not so good." The exit fantasy and the dream of mobility with which *In the Distance* ends, then, have become unavailable for the novel's contemporary readers. The ending drives home the realization that climate change leaves readers to a more limited and diminished world.

For readers of American literature, this mismatch between the opportunities and liberties conveyed by the historical reality represented in a novel and the limitations that mark the world in which the novel is set is not unique. At the end of Mark Twain's novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, published in 1884 but set "forty to fifty" (v) years earlier, Huck famously walks away from the trappings of "sivilize[d]" (335) society in Mississippi and "light[s] out for the Territory." In the Antebellum period that is *Huckleberry Finn*'s setting, vast parts of North America west of the Mississippi had not yet acquired statehood and were merely organized territories pushing the frontier ever westward. When the novel was published in the mid-1880s, the notion that the territories constituted a viable prospect of freedom from the shackles of civilization would have struck its readers as obsolete. By the end of the decade, the Wyoming Territory would be recognized as the Union's forty-fourth state; in 1890, the National Census Bureau declared the closing of the frontier and absolved itself of the task of tracking the population's further westward drift, which it considered complete. Three years later, historian Frederick Jackson Turner's famous frontier thesis situated the frontier at the heart of America's history and national character. If, as Turner has it, each new frontier offered "a new field of opportunity" (38) and "a gate of escape from the bondage of the past," that exit was now closed and the nation condemned to immanence.

Diaz's and Twain's strategies of deflation confront their readers with the reality of diminishment—with the inevitability of the no-longer-possible. They counter the denial inherent in the most significant cultural response to the closing of the frontier with the genre of the western. It is customary to see the western as a posthu-

mous genre, which began flourishing at the end of the nineteenth century when social upheaval and anxiety over the closing of the frontier informed an imaginative reconstruction of the recent past. The mid-to-late nineteenth-century settlement of the North American interior became the imaginative backdrop for fantasies of a less fatally constricted world. The western emerged to celebrate the frontier at the moment it closed, and the genre conspicuously cultivated a sense of nostalgia for a lost world of mobility, conquest, and freedom. In contrast, Diaz and Twain underline their fictions' irrevocable counterfactuality: they drive home the discontinuity between the world they depict and the one they address. *In the Distance* has been called an "interruptive western" (Campbell 103), mobilizing what Diaz calls "many fossilized elements" ("Feeling Foreign") of the western genre. These elements include empty landscapes, saloons, cowboys, lawlessness, revenge, misogyny, and violence. But the novel revises the meaning of those tropes: instead of indulgent fantasies of escape, they now foster an acceptance of constraint.

In the Distance's adherence to spent possibility and diminution updates the generic coordinates of the western for a climate-changed world and participates in what Theodore Martin has described as the genre's recent transformation "from a genre of epic weather into a genre of global warming" (142). At the same time, the novel develops an alternative for the dominant contemporary literary modes that make up the category of climate fiction, otherwise known as cli-fi. Cli-fi, as Axel Goodbody and Adeline Johns-Putra explain, is less a strictly codified genre than a significant body of narrative work defined "by its thematic focus on climate change and the political, social, psychological and ethical issues associated with it" (2). Their survey of this body of work notes a gradual shift from speculative modes ("imaginings of the future impact of climate change" [5]) to more realist approaches "beginning to explore the realities of living with climate change" in the 2010s. The speculative strand typically imagines an altered future in which climate change will have been successfully addressed or (much more often) will have led to planetary destruction and social collapse. Realist engagements with climate change linger on what Stephanie LeMenager has called "the everyday Anthropocene," or "the present tense, lived time of the Anthropocene" (225) that attends to "what it means to live, day by day, through climate shift and the economic and sociological injuries that underwrite it."

For all their differences, these templates both present diminishment as a reality to be overcome or prevented, rather than as part

of a necessary downscaling of our modes of life. Climate change realism presents the reality of lives afflicted by bioderegulation and slow violence, while speculative fiction typically reinforces readers' attachments to modern contraptions and achievements by imagining the insufficiency and horror of a world without them. As Chad Harbach observes about Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, an almost paradigmatic postcatastrophe novel, it "defends the world we know by giving us none of it" ("The End"). In that way, the novel paradoxically buttresses readers' attachment to current levels of consumption and mobility. Anna Kornbluh has noted that science fiction writing such as that of Kim Stanley Robinson has paradoxically become more realist in a climate-changed world because it replaces sci-fi's imaginative excess with an acceptance of "constraints of finitude [and] mortality" (102) and a "constriction of the environment" (104). If Robinson's novel *New York 2140* counts as "a diminution of science fiction to realism" (103), then *In the Distance* does something similar for historical fiction. By insisting that the historical possibilities it evokes are no longer available, it renders the present as a reality of abbreviated possibility and emphasizes the need to cultivate limitation rather than limitless pursuit.

In his account of the fate of the historical novel in the Anthropocene, Ian Baucom underlines that historical fiction has the power to generate new potentialities even if the planet seems to be altered beyond repair. Historical novels such as David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, Baucom writes, provide "countercodes for reading the temporal and ontological plurality of Anthropocene time and, in doing so, for opening possibilities for thinking the noninevitability of this apparently inevitable future" (138). *In the Distance*, I argue, unlocks a different affordance of fiction in that it mobilizes fiction's manipulation of possibility and virtuality to convey a sense of spent possibility and fateful constriction. This does not mean that *In the Distance* is a nihilist novel: it indulges neither hopelessness—what Ryan Vu and Sharif Youssef have analyzed as the disabling "penumbral" (121) affect of defeatism in the face of the inevitable—nor the compensatory "valorization of potentiality as a site of resistance to inevitability" (122). Rather, the novel recognizes the need for limitation and mitigation. Anahid Nersessian is one of the few literary critics who have theorized such a literature of adjustment—a literature performing "an ethical operation that allows human beings to accommodate themselves to the world by minimizing the demands they place upon it" (3). Stylistically, that performance takes shape in *In the Distance* as the careful and patient notation of Håkan's interior development; in terms of plot, it consists

of his gradual withdrawal from human interaction into a self-sufficient austerity; in terms of setting, there is the pervasive monotony and loneliness of the endless desert landscape. Like the Romantic works Nersessian discusses, Diaz's novel is "keyed to self-abnegation in the face of planetary fragility and the diminishing possibilities it entails" (4). The novel's self-limiting cli-fi mode circumscribes such dwindling potentiality in a way that is markedly different from the dominant apocalypticism of much speculative fiction and the brutal actuality of climate change realism.

For Nersessian, a literature of adjustment "counters fictions of unlimited access and achievement by embracing the material constraints exemplified by aesthetic form" (13). In this essay, I read *In the Distance*'s tender, intimate style and its staging of the minimally harmful low-impact life of its burrowing protagonist together with its revisions of key intertexts in the archive of human overreach. As I show, *In the Distance* updates the western genre and most directly John Ford's classic film *The Searchers*. Its protagonist also appears as a reincarnation of Frankenstein's monster, which has come to figure prominently in reflections on the Anthropocene (in, most notably, the work of Bruno Latour). *In the Distance*, I argue, works as a determinate negation of the fantasies of fungibility and transcendence encoded in these texts, and instead reimagines human life as irrevocably implicated in geological processes from which it cannot extricate itself. The novel's stylistic, narrative, and intertextual operations contribute to its attempt to imagine limitation and nontranscendence as part of any template for adjusted living.

Monstrous Immanence: Diaz's *Frankenstein*

In the frame narrative in which the old Håkan tells his life story to the sailors on the Alaska-bound ship, Håkan makes an arresting appearance: "He was now wearing rawhide leggings, a threadbare blouse, and several layers of indeterminate wool wraps, covered by a coat made from the skins of lynxes and coyotes, beavers and bears, caribou and snakes, foxes and prairie dogs, coatis and pumas, and other unknown beasts. Here and there dangled a snout, a paw, a tail" (6). A testimony to the grit and violence of Håkan's American life, this opening description of his gracelessly stitched-together attire (which updates an earlier hodgepodge outfit equally reminiscent of "the European peasant, the Californian trapper, and the itinerant Indian" [94]) serves as a proleptic summary of the life story the rest of the novel will patiently trace. At the same time, it captures the novel's

own status as a mishmash of intertextual references. These include the revision of the western, which I discuss in the next section, and the frame narrative, which presents a group of sailors listening to a story told overnight on a stranded ship. The frame narrative recalls nothing so much as the discursive setup of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a novel famously set on a "cruising yawl" (103) on the Thames, waiting for the turn of the tide at dusk and ultimately missing "the first of the ebb" (186) in the morning through the crew's awed fascination with Marlow's story. *In the Distance*'s evocation of the violence and horror of the Wild West shifts the metaphorical heart of darkness from Conrad's Congo to the American West: while *Heart of Darkness* ends with a vision of "the tranquil waterway" (187) leading "into the heart of an immense darkness," *In the Distance* leaves us with the protagonist setting off "into the whiteness, toward the sinking sun." This concluding reference to whiteness echoes another classic text of exploration, violence, and derailing racism: Edgar Allan Poe's novel *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. Like Diaz's, Poe's novel ends on a boat. Poe's protagonist flees from black attackers and is saved by the magical appearance of "a shrouded human figure" (217) whose skin, as the very last words of the novel have it, "was of the perfect whiteness of the snow." In addition to drawing on the western, Conrad, and Poe, Diaz has remarked in an interview with Aaron Bady on the formative influence of nineteenth-century travel narratives and the work of Herman Melville. Taken together, all these texts signal *In the Distance*'s direct confrontation with a literary archive of nineteenth-century imperial overreach.

The description of Håkan's stitched-together costume not only serves as a clue to the novel's overall intertextuality, but also offers a more targeted intertextual reference to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*—whose final words see the monster "borne away by the waves, and lost in darkness and distance" (275). Frankenstein's monster is composed of "bones [collected] from the charnel houses" (52) and other remains furnished from "the dissecting room and the slaughter-house." Like Håkan, the monster is a creature "of gigantic stature" (19). Both novels are bookended by frame narratives set on ice, and they both end with their protagonists walking away on the ice. To compound the urgency of this intertextual link, one of the people crucial to Håkan's *Bildung* is Lorimer, a theologian turned botanist and zoologist. Lorimer aims to classify "species of the West that had never been described or named" (59) to divine "the origin of man" and, ultimately, "the chain that links all things together" (61). Lorimer believes "that our entire body was a projection of the brain"

(64), and that, therefore, "the brain came first," which means that "human intelligence, in some form, must have preceded all organic matter on Earth" (65). In a remarkable variation on Shelley's novel that sets the tone for its revision in *In the Distance*, the belief in the priority of human intelligence (a sort of weirdly embodied idealism in which the brain, not the mind, projects reality) does not spill over into the manipulation of life, if only because Lorimer's cosmology also emphasizes the fundamental connectedness of everything, as, he believes, "our flesh is the debris of dead stars" (61). Lorimer is merely a benign and restrained version of Victor Frankenstein—less, as the subtitle of Shelley's novel has it, a hubristic *Modern Prometheus* than a collaborative provider of care, whose practice is enriched by the insights of an Indigenous healer (who teaches Lorimer to boil instruments and wash hands for operations) and reciprocated when Håkan nurses him through a serious illness.

It is customary to read Shelley's novel as a warning about the dangers of technological and scientific hubris—and thus of the fatally exploitative and anthropocentric practices that have brought about the current environmental crisis. Staging a protagonist tinkering with natural life only to find himself on the receiving end of his creature's revenge mission, *Frankenstein* has been called "the perfect metaphor for the Anthropocene era" (MacCormack). *In the Distance*'s choice of a caring and benign scientist is in keeping with its advocacy of a posture of limitation. In an influential intervention on human life's place in the Anthropocene, Bruno Latour has noted that Victor Frankenstein's crime was not only a matter of arrogance, but also of a lack of care. It is not so much "that he invented a creature through some combination of hubris and high technology, but rather that *he abandoned the creature to itself*" ("Love Your Monsters"). Believing that he can separate himself from his creature, Victor denies his fundamental entanglement with the world he cocreated and shuns "the normal duty of *continuing* to care for unwanted consequences." In contrast, with help of an Indigenous character, Lorimer teaches Håkan "a form of impassive care" (84) and surgical skills when attending to a group of horribly mutilated Indigenous people, most of whose lives they save. Later, when the two part ways, Håkan is given a pony, a donkey, gold, money, and surgical instruments—which is more than Frankenstein's monster could hope for. Lorimer exemplifies the duty of continued care that, for Latour, follows from humans' crucial role in redesigning and reshaping the planet. Limitation and sustained responsibility complement one another in the ethos the novel proposes.

The emphasis on limitation is also apparent when we compare Frankenstein's monster to Håkan: if the former repays his painful abandonment by humans with a campaign of murderous revenge, the latter responds to the violence done to him by withdrawing from human interaction and living a minimally harmful burrowed life. In an essay on *Frankenstein*, Diaz (who is also a literary scholar) comments on the book's relation to Shelley's later novel *The Last Man*: "I find it remarkable that Shelley should write a novel about the first superman (Frankenstein's creature is stronger and smarter than any human) and then, a few years later, a novel about the last man. Victor Frankenstein's creation is one of the loneliest characters in literature" ("11 Stories"). In its careful and patient depiction of the intimate life of Håkan and of his remarkable refusal of violence and excess, *In the Distance* shows what it means to sustain loneliness and to assume abandonment as a self-limiting way of life.

In the Distance's commitment to self-limitation does not mean that it promotes an illusory retreat from violence and guilt to pastoral innocence: when the ending of the novel alerts us to the reality of Arctic heating, it strongly conveys the impossibility of escaping the human destruction of the lifeworld. Håkan's burrowing, as we will see, is not a pastoral retreat, but a way of assuming guilt and responsibility. For Latour, our enmeshment with the environment is irrevocable, and the ethical lesson is to (in the words of the title of his essay) "Love Your Monsters." Latour proposes a "compositionist" account of the relation between the human and the nonhuman: human development consists in "a process of becoming ever-more attached to, and intimate with, a panoply of nonhuman natures." This leads to an "ever-increasing degree of *intimacy* with the new natures we are constantly creating," and to an inevitable proliferation of unintended consequences. An ethics of the Anthropocene, for Latour, consists in "accepting . . . the normal duty of *continuing* to care for unwanted consequences, even if this means going further and further down into the imbroglios." In his essay on *Frankenstein*, Diaz singles out that novel's lingering fantasies of escape as one of its key limitations. Late in the novel, Victor Frankenstein flees the confines of European reason by studying Persian, Arabic, and Hebrew; the monster, for its part, promises to "go to the vast wilds of South America" (Shelley qtd. in "On *Frankenstein*") if Victor will only give him the mate he needs. Diaz notes how Shelley seems to imagine South America as "a prelapsarian Arcadia." In reality, however, "around the time the novel was published . . . most of South America was involved in wars of independence and efforts to constitute sovereign states." Already in

1818, then, and in a way *Frankenstein* failed to appreciate, the fantasy of leaving trouble behind was becoming a planetary impossibility. *In the Distance*'s refusal of *Frankenstein*'s residual exit fantasies puts forward responsibility and immanence as key features of the ethos of limitation to which it gives shape.

Unwanted Violence: *In the Distance* and *The Searchers*

In the Distance's displacement of Frankenstein's monster to the American West invites us to link the novel's ethics and aesthetics of immanence and self-limitation to its update of the western genre. In his philosophical account of the genre, Robert B. Pippin describes it as performing a triply violent struggle of liberation: the western encodes a project of extrication from Indigenous populations, nature, and an "inner nature" (228) whose drives and passions need to be curbed for civilization to establish itself. The environment, in the western, appears as "an extraordinarily hostile, inhospitable natural world," "dangerous and treacherous" (229) and it can only be contained by "labor, persistence, violence, and technology" (228). In a recent reassessment of the western's relation to climate change, Martin proposes to reread the genre "in terms of ecological rather than political history" (131), as this genre of ranching, mining, exploration, and trains is, if anything, the "representative genre of fossil capitalism." When, under the tutelage of Lorimer, Håkan gradually learns to look "at any particle with sufficient care" (61) and see nature as "an expanding enigma" (62) without turning it "into a storehouse, a symbol, or a fact" (61), this pedagogy underlines the novel's aim to envision a less exploitative or antagonistic relation to nature. In *In the Distance*, as in the western, violence and transgression are inevitable; but unlike in the western, they are not glorified.

In *West of Everything*, her classic study of "the inner life of Westerns" (her book's subtitle), Jane Tompkins sees the genre perform a "rejection of Christian forgiveness as a way of dealing with injury" (35). If popular fiction of the mid-nineteenth century embodies a form of evangelical reform Christianity, the western genre exchanges "the cross for the gun." For Tompkins, the shift is markedly gendered: the emergence of the western's masculinist ethos of revenge, hard work, and emotionally stifling taciturnity is a reaction to the increasing prominence of women in public life—a "massive pushing away of the female, domestic, Christian version of reality" (42). If Pippin approaches the western as a genre that grapples with the emergence of society in "classic state-of-nature thought experiments" (225), then

Tompkins underscores the antifeminine thrust of the genre's key coordinates. And if for Pippin the suppression of inner life is necessary for the establishment of a political order, then for Tompkins the western hero's silence also indexes an adamant refusal of a less toxically gendered way of life. *In the Distance*'s narrative perspective undoes that suppression: it painstakingly attends to the modulations and variations of Håkan's inner life. While Håkan's spoken interactions with other humans throughout the story are very minimal, the novel makes it clear that this is not a heroic choice, but rather the result of an initial inability to understand the languages spoken around him and a later painful surrender of social connection.

The novel's central scene (located in the exact middle of the book) underlines the idea that violence and guilt are ineluctable, while it also registers the loss of the more sustaining relationships they entail. In the build-up to this scene, Håkan has joined a group of pioneers and finds himself falling in love with a young woman named Helen. Håkan lacks the vocabulary to name or even recognize his feelings: he phrases them as a form of "admiration" (126), "close attention" (127), and "heightened awareness," which underscores the continuity between the attentiveness to the natural world he learned from Lorimer and his consideration of "the softness, the wonder, the desire" (130) he begins to feel for another human being. The pioneers are suddenly attacked by a gang of Indigenous people, who withdraw when a group of white men turn up to chase them away. Soon the saviors visit the camp of the travelers. They seem to come in friendship, until Håkan sees paint stains on one of the rider's faces. The realization comes fast but too late: what seemed to be Indigenous attackers were in fact a disguised group of white men, which allowed the rest of the gang to show up as rescuers and gain the trust of the travelers. What follows is a short and intense "vortex of violence" (133), in which Helen is raped and killed by the "fake Indians" and in which Håkan, "scream[ing] and sobb[ing] like a child" and "only aware of each one of the bodies in front of him that needed to be destroyed" (a narrowing of attention that underlines the violent mismatch between the novel's overall attitude and this isolated outburst of violence), ends up killing and maiming several enemies while liberating the camp.

For the majority of the travelers, Håkan's feat is a cause for celebration: it consolidates the western's commitment to strength and revenge, as the corpses of the enemies are "left to rot" (134) in the sun. For Håkan, his violence will be a perpetual source of shame, as "the disgrace, the guilt, the fear" (220) will soon haunt him away

from human intercourse altogether. When he leaves the group, he leaves his gun behind. This "feeling of sorrow and senselessness" (133) contrasts with Victor Frankenstein's desperate pursuit of the monster after it kills Victor's wife Elizabeth. The feeling's meaning emerges even more clearly when we read it as a revision of one of the most famous scenes in the history of the western—the ranch attack scene in John Ford's *The Searchers*. Pippin singles out this film as "one of the greatest and most ambitious films ever made" (229), not least because of its sustained moral complexity, embodied in the hero Ethan Edwards (played by John Wayne). For Pippin, the film reveals the persistence—in the western, and in the American self-understanding it encodes—of "the most powerful and explosive human passion—hatred" (227). More specifically, the film reveals "racism and racial hatred" (228). The instigating event in the film, as in Diaz's novel, is a fake attack: there are rumors of a cattle raid by so-called Indians, and a group of ranchers and rangers leaves the ranch to chase them. But the rustling turns out to have been a ruse, which leaves the ranch unprotected and makes it possible for Comanches to attack and murder some of the people there, abduct others, and rape and kill Martha, the wife of Ethan's brother.

The first scenes of the film suggest a growing illicit sexual attraction between Edwards and Martha, even if this attraction is never consummated or even articulated—another remarkable parallel to *In the Distance*'s rendering of the inarticulate intimacy between Helen and Håkan. Yet this affinity only underscores the film's and the novel's radically different responses to the rape and killing of the lover. After the ranch attack, *The Searchers* consists of a years-long obsessive revenge mission, in which Ethan indulges in acts of gratuitous cruelty against animals and Indigenous people. He is intent on killing Martha's abducted daughter, Debbie, for the simple reason that her proximity to Indigenous people means, for Ethan, that she would be better off dead. His "eruptions of hatred, revenge, racism, and blind fury" (Pippin 233) contrast sharply with Håkan's shamed withdrawal from human society. Gratuitous violence is a crucial part of the film's moral code and of the western, in which there is no room for forgiveness or shame. Diaz's novel rewrites that code in a crucial way. The attack in *The Searchers* that provides an alibi for violent excess is rewritten as a more sinister scenario in which ideas about Indigenous mendacity are cynically manipulated as part of an entirely white ploy. Moreover, Håkan's violent reaction is an unwanted yet unstoppable impulse and not a carefully and sadistically cultivated code of conduct. Violence, in the world of the novel, is not a matter of vengeance, but proceeds even without such legitimation; in this

world, guilt cannot be outsourced to a racial Other, but needs to be assumed.

This rewriting of the moral code of the western (and of *Frankenstein*'s reciprocal campaign of revenge) goes to the heart of *In the Distance*'s exploration of implicatedness and limitation. In contrast to Ethan Edwards and Frankenstein's monster, Håkan at no time consciously decides to use violence or to take revenge—the violence has already happened by the time he realizes it: "He had a keen memory of his departure from himself as he stabbed someone in the liver" (133). And still, he is irrevocably responsible and will have to live with the knowledge that he is a killer. Shame and regret don't matter: the violence has occurred. For Latour, the Anthropocene calls on us to continue to care for a world that has been shaped by our actions. *In the Distance* intensifies this demand: even if the damage we inflict on others and the environment is deeply unwanted and not even the result of conscious decisions, there is no denying our responsibility. In the world of the novel, responsibility must be assumed through a code of limitation. *In the Distance*'s muted and diminutive revision of a nineteenth-century archive of imperial and technological overreach underlines a point made by Nersessian: for some forms of literature (Nersessian's own Romantic archive, but also Diaz's novel), formal restraint and imaginative curtailment allegorize "the proper orientation of human beings toward an existence motivated by appetite but capped by planetary exigence" (18). Rather than "posit[ing] the transcendence of material constraints as their ultimate goal," as is all too customary in the genres of the western and science-fiction, some works of literature, Nersessian argues, "ground their solicitation of a better world in forms whose effects are actively limited and limiting."

Geological Immanence

The notion of the Anthropocene underlines human life's oversized role in changing the ecological and chemical make-up of the planet. In the field of geology, it names human life's role as an important geological force—more powerful than rocks, volcanoes, and tectonic plates. For some, this calls for human pride, as in the ecomodernist belief in the "conscious acceleration" ("Ecomodernist Manifesto"18) of the "decoupling [of] human well-being from the destruction of nature" or in the enthusiastic recitation of Steward Brand's statement that "we are as gods, so we may as well get good at it" (qtd. in Hamilton 233). Against such fantasies of transcendence, more critical Anthropocene discourse emphasizes that human life is irrevocably

implicated with geological processes; human life is not only an agent driving the environmental crisis, but also finds itself on the receiving end of processes of planetary deterioration. Recognizing human life as a geological force, then, implies recognizing responsibility as well as vulnerability. Limitation becomes both a moral imperative and a strategy for survival.

In the Distance's geological imagery is one of its key strategies for conveying its commitment to limitation and immanence. Remarkably, this imagery is reliably linked to figures of whiteness, most notably through repeated descriptions of the endless and monotonous desert as unbearably white, and as so encompassing as to leave no room for transcendence or escape. Indeed, the novel's rhetoric of whiteness literalizes the key insight in critical race studies that whiteness, by failing to recognize itself as coconstituted in a differential relation to other positions, ends up crowding out and suffocating all difference. I already noted how the novel's final line shifts the "darkness" (Conrad 187) of the last lines of *Heart of Darkness* and *Frankenstein* to a figure of whiteness, and how the novel rewrites the constitutive racism of the western genre as a dynamic of violence internal to whiteness (even if that whiteness, through the Indigenous disguise, coopts racial prejudice against non-whites). References to whiteness define the untranscendable limit of the novel's world from the very first sentence—which mentions a "white plain merging into the white sky" (1)—to the very last one. Whiteness saturates the landscape, not only in the first sentence, but also in the many iterations of the idea that the landscape and the sky are indistinguishable. The horizon stops being a site of escape and transcendence, and the white desert becomes a site of constriction: the characters find themselves "exhausted by the whiteness" (68) and "gagged, stuffed, choked with whiteness" (67) while the horizon is referred to as a "noose"—a reminder of fatal implication rather than a catalyst for fantasies of escape.

Kathryn Yusoff has shown that the historical construction of whiteness and the dehumanization of its others is deeply entangled with the operations of geology or what she calls "White Geology" (*A Billion* 1). *In the Distance* also articulates its rhetoric of whiteness through a geological imagery. When gazing on a reflective surface, Håkan "always looked at his teeth first" (155), because "with their untainted whiteness, they were the only part of his body that reminded him of who he used to be." This "untainted whiteness" is not an index of innocence: it points to a violent denial of difference, and it entangles the novel's geological imagery with questions of historical guilt and responsibility. Geology is closer to Håkan's sense of self

than biology. At the beginning of the novel, the young Håkan is sexually exploited by a mysterious woman, even though he lacks the knowledge to name this abuse as such. Instead, the woman afflicts him as an excess of dreadful and toothless vitality: opening her lips, she reveals "black, gleaming, toothless gums, streaked with bulging veins of pus" (37); "her rotten mouth" (46) produces "rumbling, slobbering, malformed words" (45), which seem to come "from the pair of shiny slugs in her mouth" (47). Håkan's mental defense consists in trying "to wiggle his molars to make sure they were firm" (38)—as if the geological permanence of bone provides a relief from his exposure to the dreary excess of life that afflicts him.

If his teeth remind Håkan "of who we used to be," then the novel also repeatedly connects them to a deep future perspective that underscores his vulnerability and implication in a decidedly finite world. Håkan repeatedly contemplates his own future as a fossil: "What would men become in the distant future? Would those faraway descendants regard his own bones as the carcass of some primitive beast?" (66). Later, he muses how "once beasts and maggots were done with his flesh, some of his bones would remain scattered on the plains for longer than he had lived. Then, he would be erased" (158). Such posthumous fantasies are a key feature of the Anthropocene imagination, and they challenge human species pride by raising "the spectre of *the human as fossil to come*" (Yussof, "Geologic Life" 782). This posthumous perspective encloses human life even more firmly in the monotonous whiteness of a geological reality.

It is significant that the novel imagines the relation between the human and the nonhuman through the austere materiality of geology rather than the cozy symbioses of natural life, which is much more customary in ecocritical thought. Håkan's life is figured as what Yusoff has called a "geological life." For Yusoff, there is a "geologic dimension of subjectivity as immanent yet unspoken within the human"("Geologic Life" 789) as subjectivity is never a hybrid mixture of different local elements, but "always contains both an anterior and interior nonhuman excess" ("Geologic Subjects" 383). By emphasizing this irreducible excess that refuses to mix with the other constituents of human life, this geological account of human subjectivity resists the kinds of hybridity and relationality that dominant modes of ecological thought such as material ecocriticism and new materialism put forward. Such accounts are committed to the ways human and nonhuman realities "intra-act" (Barad 89) with one another as different instantiations of "vibrant matter" (Bennett viii). But their focus on localized encounters, Yusoff writes, over-

looks that "subjectivity always draws from temporal and immaterial registers that exceed those localities" ("Geological Subjects" 401). *In the Distance* figures that excess as geological agency and as a cosmic future wherein human distinctiveness will have collapsed with other geological realities. It qualifies human life as a reality that can deny neither its implication in nor its responsibility for processes of planetary derailment and environmental disruption.

The geological perspective of human life theorized by Yusoff and imagined in *In the Distance* puts forward the intimate interconnectedness between human and nonhuman realities, but it does not dissolve them into a reciprocally sustaining symbiosis. Human action is inevitably a process of planetary scarring, and these effects of human action can neither be denied nor erased. When Håkan drives his pony through the desert, "all that could be heard was the thin earth—rock pulverized through the seasons, bones milled by the elements, ashes scattered like a whisper over the plains—being further ground under the hooves" (94). Human (and animal) life participate in the accretion of the earth; it is both geological material (bones, ashes) and geological agent (doing the grinding). If the notion of the Anthropocene is traditionally taken to elevate human life to the status of a crucial geological force, then *In the Distance*'s imagining of geological life as a reminder of human limitation is part of its rewriting of a nineteenth-century archive of Anthropocene violence.

Håkan's withdrawal from society (initially with Asa, who is the second love of his life, even though Håkan—as with Helen—lacks the words to articulate this intimacy) is also a turn to geology. As Håkan and Asa come to "a hall of sorts" (199) in the rocks, he finds it "too magnificent to be human, too intimate to be natural." He soon finds "bliss in [his and Asa's] austere life in the dome" surrounded by "some remarkable fossils (legged shields, spiral shells, thorny fish)." After Asa's death, he "decide[s] to dig and build down" (202), and obsessively keeps digging for as long as he lives there, even if the place resists his manipulation and forces him to refill many of the trenches: "there was no way to keep such a vast maze from collapsing . . . The elements prevailed" (204). The period in the burrow (years, if not decades long) not only witnesses Håkan's emancipation as a geological subject but also his self-limitation as geological material: "looking back at these months, he pictured himself as one of the fossils encrusted in the rock face." Again, geological agency is an occasion for limitation—bereft of either comfort or control: "Immense as they were, those territories had never held him or embraced him . . . Nothing was his; nothing claimed him" (228).

The novel's encounter with the geology of the desert world asserts itself as monotony, lack of distinction, and indifferent repetition—most notably through the novel's rhetoric of whiteness. In this section of the novel, the narrative grammar expresses the equivalence of all moments in such a monotonous life by patiently listing the unspectacular events that make up the mature Håkan's every day life, and then simply repeating these paragraphs with miniscule variations without even remarking on this repetition (I won't be the only reader who must initially have suspected this repetition-with-minimal-variation was just a matter of poor text production by Coffee House Press). There is neither progress nor exit. Commenting on the manipulation of time in the genre of the western, Martin notes that what appears as a "timeless struggle between human society and the natural world, or, more precisely, between human time and nature's timelessness" (132) is in fact "its own kind of time: very, very, very slow time." For Martin, this equips the genre to address "the impossibly slow transformation of the climate"(133). In *In the Distance*, the violence of anthropogenic climate change is countered by an ethos of limitation—an ethos that reminds the reader of what is no longer possible. This ethos mitigates the violence of *Frankenstein*, reduces the pervasive violence of the western to a sudden eruption and its infinite shamed aftermath, and imagines human implication as a form of geological life.

Håkan and The Hawk: Climate Change and the Pedagogy of Cross-Checking

When Håkan returns to the social world after his shamed withdrawal, he notices that the society around him has not only failed to share the shame he feels about his killing of the attackers but has also turned him into a figure of awe. When he identifies himself as Håkan, he realizes that his name and story is no longer his to tell: the people call him "the Hawk . . . You killed all those people" (141). Arriving in the city, he is surprised to see his own picture on what turns out to be a most wanted poster for "the terrible, the famous Hawk" (166), the "giant sinner" (170), the "giant murderer." Apart from the news of his physical prowess, Håkan's surgical skill has also become the stuff of legend: he is called the "giant killer doctor" (167), as if he were a master of life and death. Later, Håkan notices that his "notoriety had grown into a myth" (190), a "legend" (221); he even witnesses an almost ritual performance that reenacts his amplified deeds. If Frankenstein's creature turns into a monster by being shunned by

human civilization, Håkan becomes the Hawk in a world "abuzz with stories" (190): he becomes a "monster" through innuendo, rumor, and the vagaries of multilingual communication that amplify reality until the myth of the Hawk replaces the reality of Håkan's suffering on which it is purportedly based.

The plot's emphasis on the way mediation distorts reality and generates monsters becomes even more relevant when we remember that *In the Distance* is a work of cli-fi. In *Climate Change Scepticism: A Transnational Ecocritical Analysis*, Greg Garrard and his colleagues underline the affinities between climate-skeptical discourse and the operations of literature. It is because literary criticism has the tools to track the ways texts can distort their referential basis and erect stereotypes that it can meaningfully address discourses that obscure the insights of climate science. The centrality to the plot of Håkan's transmogrification into the Hawk signals Diaz's novel's awareness of the role of mediation and distortion in addressing the climate crisis. The novel's own discourse, in which Håkan is given room to narrate the intimate reality that the myth of the Hawk has supplanted, provides an alternative space for countering his life's distortion into a twisted legend. Again, the novel's formal achievement—marked by sensitivity, patience, and restraint—serves as part of its message: the novel records and recognizes but does not glorify violence and transgression. The collateral damage and undesired consequences of violent actions, for their part, are given sustained attention.

The novel consistently foregrounds the temptation to turn reality into myth: Håkan initially looks "like an old, strong Christ" (2), a "Titan" (6); once captured, he is put on display and taunted in a way that resembles the Passion of Christ. Lorimer even surmises that Håkan could be a kind of Messiah, as he wonders whether Håkan "reaching beyond the rest of us, [might be] an example of what humans might become" (78). By marking such moments of amplification and inflation alongside the Håkan/Hawk-plot, the novel invites readers to attend to textual detail and to resist the facile projection of symbolic or allegorical meanings. Ultimately, I have adopted this approach in this essay: attending (rather pedantically) to the natural history of the Bering Strait, to the novel's subtle reorganization of the quasi-mythical templates of the western and the story of Frankenstein, and to its conspicuous investment in geological rather than biological imagery. *In the Distance* constantly foregrounds the counterfactuality of the realities it engages, as it drives home the realization that the cultural scripts the novel revises and the ending it offers are no longer possible in the world in which the novel is released. Paradoxi-

cally, this insistence on counterfactuality invites readers to attend to the reality of undesired consequences and collateral damage as well as to compare the world of the novel with both the quasi-mythical constructions it confronts and the climate-changed world it inhabits.

In a recent essay, Paul K. Saint-Amour distinguishes counterfactual fiction from realist and speculative narrative; while *In the Distance* is not an alternate-history novel, its emphasis on the discontinuity between different worlds operates in much the same way Saint-Amour describes. For Saint-Amour, in the case of realist and speculative fictions, it is superfluous to check the factual details in the storyworld because in realist works they presume a world shared by text and reader, and in speculative fiction the text's world is fundamentally different from the reader's. In novels premised on world-divergence (alternate-history novels but also, I argue, *In the Distance*), in contrast, Saint-Amour argues that reality effects "tend toward the constitutively and redundantly checkable" (1138). By inviting readers to constantly monitor the divergence between the fictional world and the real world (of which the fictional world is clearly presented as an alternative version), these works "[bend] fiction to a pedagogy of the checkable fact, the refutable claim" (1140). Saint-Amour maintains that through this "commitment to the verifiable," the novel becomes a front of opposition to historical falsification. In the face of a regime of alternative facts and post-truth, the counterfactual's paradoxical insistence on falsifiability and verifiability reaffirms "the possibility of fact" (Boggs and Tang 1112)—the fact, for instance, that certain things are simply no longer possible and certain exits no longer available (the fact, in other words, of limitation). As Colleen Glenney Boggs and Chenxi Teng note, this paradoxically turns such fiction into a "key literary site for concerns about historical evidence and, because of its grounding in history's contingencies, a genre opposed to historical relativism." Limits, these fictions show, are real.

In the Distance's invitation to cross-check is a crucial part of the vision of limitation it conveys. Ultimately, this ethos is most apparent in the relation between reader and protagonist—which, for all the novel's meticulous attentiveness to Håkan's interiority, is marked by an unbridgeable disconnect. By planting an uneducated and monolingual Scandinavian boy in a setting (the Wild West) that, for contemporary readers, is irrevocably premediated and saturated by films, television, comics, novels, and cultural myths, the novel invites readers to encounter the mid-nineteenth-century West Coast as if for the first time. Yet that "as if" is crucial, as for Håkan it literally is the first time he encounters this reality, and he does so without preme-

diation (the only preparation he has are the "outrageous American vignettes" [18] his brother thought up, and which, when checked against the austere reality of the desert, turn out to be dreamlike versions of Sweden rather than informed projections). Even as the novel offers a defamiliarizing perspective on a reality with which contemporary media-consumers are numbingly familiar, it imposes a constant awareness of the vast gap that separates Håkan's perspective from ours. In the climate-changed present, it seems, it is no longer possible to access the world as if we were not implicated in it. What remains in the distance is a kind of innocence that Håkan loses over the course of the novel, and that the novel reminds its reader is now lost forever.

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