

Carolin Gebauer

## Dreading the Future

### The Ethical Implications of Contemporary Speculative Fiction

Given that today's world is preoccupied with climate change, it comes as no surprise that recent speculative narratives predominantly focus on the future of planet Earth. Yet such Anthropocene novels do not make up the entirety of contemporary speculative narratives. This essay first explores how the genre draws on current societal, political, economic, and ecological trends to create dystopian scenarios, and then goes on to investigate the ethical dimension of these models for the world. In the first step it takes John Lanchester's *The Wall* (2019), Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986), and Joanne Ramos's *The Farm* (2019) as examples and shows how speculative narratives stage ideologies and negotiate human values on the level of both narrative content and narrative transmission. The second step, an investigation into the interplay of the ethics of the telling and the ethics of the told, then serves to illustrate the degree to which the aesthetic form of a narrative can determine the ethical implications of reading speculative fiction in the age of the Anthropocene.

#### 1. Introduction\*

In recent years, narratives of the future have increasingly dealt with what seems the most pressing topic of our contemporary world: human-generated climate change.<sup>1</sup> Since most of these “Anthropocene fictions” (Trexler 2015) envisage dreadful scenarios in which the impact of environmental pollution has devastated or even destroyed the Earth, the genre largely overlaps with that type of narrative which Margaret Atwood (2012, 5-7) identifies as “speculative fiction.” Speculative narratives anticipate possible future scenarios, evoking storyworlds that are set in a future not too remote from our present. More specifically, these narratives create what Brian McHale (2011) would refer to as “models *for* the world”: they contrive fictional worlds which do not yet resemble our real world, but which, in view of current trends, might very well be conceivable in a not-too-distant future.<sup>2</sup> Speculative novels present these worlds in a highly negative light, emphasizing their depressive, grim, sometimes even horrifying nature. They are truly dystopian (cf. Atwood 2005, 93) if, with Lyman Tower Sargent (1994, 9), we take a dystopia to be “a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which the reader lived.”

While most Anthropocene climate-change novels qualify as instances of speculative or dystopian fiction, the reverse does not hold: Speculative or dystopian narratives do not necessarily address topics related to climate change. In the introduction to their collected volume *Worlds Gone Awry. Essays on Dystopian Fiction* (2018), John J. Han, C. Clark Triplett, and Ashley G. Anthony speculate about possible reasons for the current popularity of the genre:

[P]eople who live in today's society are increasingly concerned about the future of the world. Literature reflects the concerns and anxieties of readers, and dystopian literature focuses particularly on the potential problems humans face, such as totalitarianism, political anarchy, technological oppression, environmental disasters, global war, resource shortage, and widespread disease, among many others. (Ibid., 1f.)

The genre's secret of success seems, then, to be its topicality: In inventing fearful models for the world, speculative fiction responds to the numerous crises humanity has to deal with in the twenty-first century. And Han et al.'s statement highlights the multiplicity of these crises; as well as climate change, they relate to political, cultural, economic, societal, technological, or medical issues. Indeed, contemporary speculative narratives that do *not* thematize climate change are numerous – just think of Christine Dalcher's *Vox* (2018), Dave Egger's *The Circle* (2017), John Ironmonger's *Not Forgetting the Whale* (2015), Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), or Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014), to name but a few.

To what extent do these speculative narratives negotiate human values and responsibilities with regard to their highly topical themes? Proceeding from the premise that dystopian future scenarios generally raise ethical questions, this essay seeks to explore the ethical dimension of speculative fiction. With this end in mind, I will particularly focus on selected narratives that are not, or at least not exclusively, concerned with climate change: John Lanchester's *The Wall* (2019), Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986), and Joanne Ramos's *The Farm* (2019). While Lanchester's novel addresses the consequences of both climate change and national isolationism in times of globalization, Atwood's and Ramos's narratives deal with the ethical implications of surrogacy in combination with religious fundamentalism and commercialization respectively.

To analyze the nexus between ethics and storytelling in Lanchester's, Atwood's, and Ramos's texts, I will draw on James Phelan's (2011) distinction between two ethical dimensions of narrative: the ethics of the telling and the ethics of the told. The ethics of the telling, on the one hand, "stem[s] from how the author relates to her audience through the development of the various means at her disposal" (ibid., 56); it consequently involves the aspect of narrative mediation. The ethics of the told, on the other, "stem[s] from the ethical dimensions of what is represented through those means" (ibid.); it refers, therefore, to the aspect of narrative content. These two layers of ethical communication often interact in narrative texts, because "ways of telling inevitably have consequences for an audience's understanding of the told" (ibid.).

Adopting Phelan's notions that "the ethical component of literary communication is double-layered" (ibid.) and that the ethical potential of a narrative usually unfolds in an interplay of narrative content and narrative mediation, my narratological readings of *The Wall*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *The Farm* will investigate how these texts negotiate ethical issues on both their story and discourse levels. This will involve not only examining the make-up of the models for the world which these narratives present (story), but also inquiring into the various techniques they deploy in order to evoke such future scenarios (discourse). My analyses will show that the selected novels often resort to metareferential strategies such as metanarration, intertextuality, and interdiscursivity to construct their storyworlds; and they all make use of unconventional narrative perspectives involving the use of present-tense and / or second-person narration. The essay will close with a discussion of the genre's interplay of the ethics of the told and the ethics of the telling that will offer some hypotheses regarding the ethical implications of reading speculative fiction in the age of the Anthropocene.

## **2. Defending the British Nation against Climate Refugees: Second-Person Present-Tense Narration in John Lanchester's *The Wall* (2019)**

John Lanchester's *The Wall*, published in 2019, is a perfect example of Anthropocene fiction. The narrative is set in England after planet Earth has been considerably transformed by a mysterious incident which the text exclusively designates as "the Change." Only halfway through the novel do readers learn from a speech delivered by a politician that this change with a capital C actually refers to climate change:

As you all know, the Change was not a single solitary event. We speak of it in that manner because here we experienced one particular shift, of sea level and weather, over a period of years it is true, but it felt then and when we look back on it today still feels like an incident that happened, a defined moment in time with a before and an after. There was our parents' world, and now there is our world. (Lanchester 2019b, 110)

Lanchester's novel accordingly qualifies as what Sylvia Mayer (2014, 23) terms "a narrative of catastrophe," that is, a narrative portraying a disastrous future scenario in which climate change has already culminated in global climate collapse. Within this altered world, most parts of the Earth have been inundated and countless people have left their homes. These climate refugees, referred to in the novel as "the Others," now seek shelter on the British Isles, one of the rare places on Earth that still remain above sea level. The British have therefore built a massive wall around their country, to shield themselves from the unwanted rush of refugees.

The image of the Wall adds a second level of meaning to Lanchester's novel. Lisa Allardice (2019, n.p.) argues that, after the EU referendum in 2016

when the UK voted to leave the European Union, “a wall is surely shorthand for ugly political and ideological division,” so that “it is hard not to read the novel as a riff on Brexit.” Indeed, construing the Wall as a symbol of Britain’s withdrawal from the European Union enables us to recognize that the Change repeatedly mentioned in the narrative does not exclusively refer to climate change in a literal sense; it also stands for a change in Britain’s political climate. Seen in this light, *The Wall* can be characterized not only as an ecological dystopia, but also as a satirical state-of-the-nation novel (cf. Zwieler / Rostek 2019, 128). But, I will argue, the allegorical and ecocritical readings each disclose a different ethical dimension of Lanchester’s novel.

*The Wall* is told by the protagonist Joseph Kavanagh, who looks back on a stage in his life when he was a member of the National Coastal Defence Structure (NCDS). In Lanchester’s storyworld, every British citizen has to participate for at least two years in one of the task forces of the national protection program – the Flight, the Coast Guards, or the Defenders. Since the auto-diegetic narrator served as a Defender, he starts his narrative account by sharing his memories of his first day on the Wall:

It’s cold on the Wall. That’s the first thing everybody **tells you**, and the first thing **you notice** when **you’re** sent there, and it’s the thing **you think** about all the time **you’re** on it, and it’s the thing **you remember** when **you’re** not there any more. It’s cold on the Wall. (Ibid., 3; my emphasis)

Even though Lanchester’s novel is largely written in the first-person past-tense perspective, its very first paragraph features the second-person pronoun *you* and the present tense. If one reads *The Wall* through the lens of econarratology – a mode of analysis which investigates the nexus between narrative form and environmental imaginations and experiences (cf. James 2015) – there are two possible readings for this combination of person and tense. On the one hand, the pronoun *you* could qualify as a “generalized *you*” (Herman 1994, 381 and passim; italics in the original), in which case the present tense would fulfill what I refer to as the transmodal function of fictional present-tense usage (cf. Gebauer forthcoming) – that is, it points to the descriptive or maybe even explanatory character of the narrator’s discourse. The given excerpt would consequently serve as a contextualization strategy that helps readers to imagine the storyworld: they learn that the narrative events are set in a cold place.

On the other hand, one could interpret the second-person pronoun as a direct reader address (cf. Fludernik 1993, 221; 2011, 110f.; Richardson 2006, 30-35), which, in turn, would suggest that Lanchester’s use of the present tense fulfills what I designate as the immersive function of present-tense narration (cf. Gebauer forthcoming). This specific use of the present tense is inspired by Marie-Laure Ryan’s (2015, 97-99) argument about the immersive potential of intermittent present-tense narration: In the context of a past-tense narrative, she contends, temporary shifts to the present tense “[create] the simulacrum of a real-time ‘life’ (rather than speech) situation” by relocating readers “from the *now* of the storytelling act to the *now* of the storyworld” (ibid., 98; italics in the original). With respect to the given passage from *The Wall*, this implies that the

text encourages readers to become immersed in Lanchester's storyworld and thus to experience this space from an internal point of view.<sup>3</sup>

The beginning of Lanchester's novel unambiguously seeks to give readers a concrete idea about its main setting – the Wall. Throughout the first five chapters of the narrative, Kavanagh frequently shifts from his regular first-person past-tense account to a second-person present-tense discourse in order to acquaint his narratee with information about what it is like to work on the Wall. For example, he warns readers that, even if “you've seen it before,” the Wall looks different “when you're standing at the bottom looking up” because it “**is** taller than you expected” (Lanchester 2019b, 5; my emphasis). He specifies that there are two types of cold on the Wall: type 1 cold “which **is** always already there, which you **know** so well and **hate** so much” (ibid., 17; my emphasis) and type 2 cold which “**starts** the same, except that as you **move** through it, it **gets** colder” (ibid., 18; my emphasis). Besides, he assures his audience that “after you have put in enough hours on the Wall, you **learn** to cope with time” (ibid., 23; my emphasis) because “[o]n the Wall, one day **is** every day. At least, it **is** in terms of the big-picture items such as the shape of the twenty-four hours, your duties, where you **go** and what you **do** and who you **do** it with” (ibid., 43; my emphasis).

From an econarratological perspective, Lanchester effectively combines second-person narration and present-tense usage in order to create a vivid image of the storyworld evoked in *The Wall*. By having his narrator systematically shift to the second-person present-tense perspective as soon as he describes the circumstances of work on the Wall, Lanchester repeatedly invites his readers to mentally transport themselves into the narrative scene. In *The Storyworld Accord. Econarratology and Postcolonial Theory* (2015), Erin James maintains that “[n]arratives [...] allow readers to simulate and live in environments they would otherwise be denied and experience those environments from an alternative perspective” (24). With respect to Lanchester's novel this means that, if readers accept the narrator's constant invitation toward immersion, they can learn about an unfamiliar world in which the consequences of climate change have transformed the Earth and altered the ways in which humans live together.

Through this experience of the narrator's living environment the novel raises the most urgent ethical question of Anthropocene fiction: What are our responsibilities toward future generations? Fairly early in the novel, Joseph Kavanagh indicates that he and his peers blame their parents' generation for the disastrous state of the world:

None of us can talk to our parents. By 'us' I mean my generation, people born after the Change. You know that thing where you break up with someone and say, It's not you, it's me? This is the opposite. It's not us, it's them. Everyone knows what the problem is. The diagnosis isn't hard – the diagnosis isn't even controversial. It's guilt: mass guilt, generational guilt. The olds feel they irretrievably fucked up the world, then allowed us to be born into it. (Lanchester 2019b, 55)

This outspoken statement on the part of the narrator prompts readers to draw parallels between Lanchester's future scenario for the world and their present reality. Given that they also live in a world which faces problems like the melting of polar ice caps and rising sea levels as the result of anthropogenic climate change, readers may consider themselves a real-world equivalent to that group of characters in the novel that Kavanagh accuses of having "irretrievably fucked up the world." Against this backdrop, *The Wall* can be read not only as a warning of what might happen to planet Earth if we do not take action against climate change, but also as an attempt to remind readers of their duty to protect the environment, if not for their own sake, then for that of their children.

What about the ethical implications of an allegorical reading of *The Wall* as a state-of-Britain narrative? Readers cannot possibly fail to ignore the novel's allusion to Brexit: The image of the Wall and its Defenders invokes a long tradition of British historical discourse. In the reign of Emperor Hadrian (second century CE), the governors of the Roman province of Britannia built a stone fortification whose remnants are still located near the border between present-day England and Scotland. Hadrian's Wall was intended to defend Britannia from attacks by Caledonians and other Northern tribes (cf. Breeze 2019, n.p.). Then during the Second World War, especially from 1940 to 1944, Britain set up the so-called Home Guard, an armed citizen militia consisting of combat veterans who volunteered to support the British Army in the event of an invasion by German forces (cf. Cullen 2011). The title of Lanchester's novel also alludes to Pink Floyd's rock opera *The Wall*, first released in 1979, which revolves around an exhausted rockstar who gradually isolates himself from society – a process symbolized by the construction (and subsequent demolition) of a wall on stage. Highlighting the notions of national defense and isolationism, these interdiscursive and intertextual references facilitate an allegorical reading of Lanchester's novel as a direct response to the EU referendum in 2016. Viewed in this light, the narrative focuses not so much on the possible consequences of anthropogenic climate change as on the impact of border control and "fence-building" (Sandrock 2019, 143) in the wake of isolationist national policies.

Not only does the conceptualization of *The Wall* as a Brexit novel realign the narrative's main theme and thus the ethics of the told, it also alters the ethics of the telling. In the allegorical reading, Lanchester's recurrent shifts from a first-person past-tense to second-person present-tense perspective can no longer be explained with reference to the transmodal and immersive functions of present-tense narration. Instead, they must be construed as a specific use of the fictional present tense to create the impression of oral discourse – or more precisely, conversational storytelling (cf. Gebauer forthcoming). This communicative function of present-tense narration mainly consists in reinforcing what Ansgar Nünning (2001) designates "narrative illusion" or "mimesis of

narration”: It evokes a communicative scenario in which readers can feel immediately addressed by the narrator.

In combination with the communicative use of present-tense narration, Lanchester’s choice of the second-person pronoun *you* serves to establish a bond between the first-person narrator and his intended British audience: “You may know in general that the nation needs more babies, and you may know that it encourages people to Breed, but you don’t know half of it until you actually set up in business as a Breeder yourself.” (Lanchester 2019b, 135; my emphasis) This example is representative of the fact that, more often than not, Kavanagh refers to Britain not as Britain, but as “the nation” (see my emphasis in the quotation above) or “the country” (see e.g. Lanchester 2019b, 47), which suggests that he regards his narratees as fellow citizens. The *I* which refers to the narrator and the *you* which refers to the readers seem, therefore, to merge into what Natalya Bekhta (2017, 106) calls ‘we’-narration: “an individual speaker’s straightforward reference to herself and another person or group to which she belongs or with which she associates herself situationally (i.e., at the moment of speaking) or more generally.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, by including British readers (“you”) in his discourse, Kavanagh (“I”) seeks to foster social cohesion between himself and the narrative audience to the effect that “you” and “I” become ‘we.’

This British ‘we,’ however, defines itself through isolation: It is an exclusive ‘we’ that is clearly set against the sum of all other (European) nations, which are collectively referred to as “the Others.” The allegorical reading of *The Wall* thus addresses the ethical question of whether, in times of globalization, it is a worthwhile objective for a nation to exclusively follow its own interests and seal itself off from its neighboring countries. The novel itself seems to answer this question in the negative: As Kirsten Sandrock (2019, 151) observes, Kavanagh recognizes right at the beginning that the extreme form of border control which is practiced in his country restricts the freedom of the nation’s citizens (“everything about the Wall means you have no choice” [Lanchester 2019b, 3]). The *mise-en-abyme* ending – the narrative ends with Kavanagh telling his partner Hifa the story which readers have just read – furthermore implies that Lanchester’s exaggeratedly isolationist Britain is anything but a successful model for a nation in a globalized world.

### **3. Submitting to Rape in Order to Serve God? Intertextuality and Metanarration in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1986)**

First published in 1986, Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* is the oldest speculative narrative discussed in this essay. Nonetheless, even though one could contest its status as contemporary fiction, its central themes of surrogacy

and the oppression of women still remain relevant today.<sup>5</sup> The novel is set in Gilead, a near-future version of the U.S. state of Maine in which pollution and nuclear destruction have rendered the vast majority of women infertile. To tackle the problem of a declining birth rate, the totalitarian theocracy has developed a government that legitimizes the oppression of women on the basis of a reactionary Puritan belief system: at the top of this patriarchal hierarchy are rich male authorities, the Commanders, who rule the state in unison, justifying all their deeds and actions with reference to suitable passages from the Bible. They cooperate with former female authorities who now teach fertile women how to become pious and obedient Handmaids. After their training, the Handmaids are transferred to the households of those Commanders whose Wives are barren. Here, they assist the domestic helps in doing the housework; their main purpose, however, is to bring a child into the house. Once every month, when a Handmaid is ovulating, her residential community holds a Ceremony during which she has to lie in the lap of her mistress while the household's patriarch rapes her. In Gileadean society, this practice is a legitimate way of producing children.

Atwood's novel is characterized by a high degree of interdiscursivity; in fact this constitutes its religious subtext. Thus the institution at which the Handmaids are trained is named after Jacob's wives in the Old Testament, and the female supervisors in charge of the Handmaids are referred to as "Aunts." The Rachel and Leah Center inevitably evokes the association of a convent in which the older nuns, the sisters of an order, educate the younger nuns, the novices. Accordingly, the greeting among Handmaids has to follow a strict behavioral code reminiscent of the responsory between priest and congregation in Catholic as well as Protestant liturgies: the Handmaid who greets first will say, "Blessed be the fruit," to which the second will reply "May the Lord open" (Atwood 1986, 29).

In addition to these allusions to ecclesiastical institutions and practices, Atwood deploys intertextual references which also serve to emphasize the religious subtext of her novel. The monthly Ceremony during which a Handmaid is raped, for instance, invokes a scene from the Bible in which Rachel asks Jacob to have intercourse with her maid Bilhah so that the latter can bear children for the couple. As it is theocratic Gilead's main justification for treating Handmaids as "two-legged wombs" (*ibid.*, 146), the passage (Genesis 30.1-3) even becomes an integral part of the Ceremony: Before a Commander rapes his Handmaid (with the support of his Wife), the entire household has to assemble and listen to the patriarch's reading of selected stories from the Bible, including that of Rachel and Bilhah (*cf. ibid.*, 99; 101).

Atwood uses all these interdiscursive and intertextual references to highlight the ethical deficiencies in Gileadean governance. Claiming to base all its laws and practices on the authority of the Old and New Testaments, the theocracy not only endorses, but even promotes surrogacy, rape, and female oppression. In the Republic of Gilead, a woman is considered most virtuous and blessed if



she is either a privileged, uncomplaining Wife of an influential Commander, or a fertile Handmaid who submissively tolerates her master violating and humiliating her because she believes that this is the path God has chosen for her. It is no coincidence that Aunt Lydia, principal of the Rachel and Leah Center, teaches her Handmaids the virtue of patience: “They also serve who only stand and wait, said Aunt Lydia. She made us memorize it.” (Ibid., 28)

Literate readers will notice that Aunt Lydia’s motto is not merely a saying; it is the last line of the sonnet “When I Consider How My Light Is Spent” by the English poet John Milton. Written in 1637, during the heyday of Puritanism in England, this sonnet perfectly encapsulates the core Puritan belief in predestination and “[p]atient attendance upon God’s will” (Hall 1999, 110). While Milton’s poem ends on a positive note which strengthens the religious speaker in his unconditional faith in a righteous God (cf. *ibid.*, 110-112), Atwood changes the tone to challenge the ethical implications of any literal exegesis of the Bible that substantiates the maltreatment of women. In Atwood’s story-world, the notion of waiting clearly has negative connotations: Rather than implying a way to salvation, it means passively enduring physical and mental degradation by a patriarchal system.

The ethical concerns which Atwood raises through her invention of the Republic of Gilead as a possible model for the world become even more pressing if one considers the ways in which she presents this model to her audience. The narrative events are conveyed through the voice of the autodiegetic narrator Offred, a thirty-three-year-old woman who serves as a Handmaid in the household of a powerful Commander called Fred (hence the name Offred, for, in Gilead, Handmaids are exclusively identified as the property of their current Commanders).<sup>6</sup> Offred’s discourse reveals her ambivalent attitude toward the Gileadean political system. By stressing more than once that she does not “want to be telling this story” (Atwood 1986, 237; 285), the autodiegetic narrator candidly admits that she is more than unhappy in her current situation and that she would rather live in a different, better world. She wishes that the narrative events she presents “were different” and “more civilized,” and she even apologizes for the fact that “there is so much pain in [her] story” (*ibid.*, 279).

At the same time, however, Offred also takes a rather distanced, if not ironic, stance on the narrative events. In Chapter Twenty-One, for instance, she relates how Janine, one of her fellow Handmaids, delivers a baby. As is usual in Gilead, all Handmaids have to attend this event in order to support their group member. Suffering from the same fate, the Handmaids have a very close relationship with one another, which the narrator illustrates by means of a temporary shift to ‘we’-narration (cf. Bekhta 2017):

[Janine]’s calmer now, air sucks evenly into her lungs, we lean forward, tensed, the muscles in our backs and bellies hurt from the strain. It’s coming, it’s coming, like a bugle, a call to arms, like a wall falling, we can feel it like a heavy stone moving down, pulled down inside us, we think we will burst. We grip each other’s hands, we are no longer single. (Atwood 1986, 135; my emphasis)

Offred's intermittent use of first-person plural pronouns in this excerpt indicates that all the Handmaids share a collective experience during Janine's labor as they not only observe her contractions, but literally feel her pain. For Offred, this is such a strange experience that she cannot refrain from sarcasm when depicting the situation. At the end of the birth scene she thinks of her mother, who in pre-Gileadean times was a radical feminist fighting for women's rights, and imagines telling her of the inverted role of women in Gileadean society: "Mother, I think. Wherever you may be. Can you hear me? You wanted a women's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies." (Atwood 1986, 137)

In addition to the numerous instances in which Atwood's narrator reflects upon and evaluates her current position in the Gileadean regime, *The Handmaid's Tale* also features several metanarrative passages in which Offred thematizes her act of narration. Considering that women are not allowed to read or write in Gilead, readers may wonder how Offred can transmit her story to a fictive narrative audience. The fact that the narrative is written in the present tense complicates the matter even further, as it evokes the impression of what, in narratological discourse, is known as "simultaneous" (Genette 1980, 218f.) or "concurrent" (Margolin 1999, 150-153) narration. Readers consequently assume that Offred relays the narrative events at the very moment she experiences them in the present of the storyworld. This synchronizing function of fictional present-tense usage (cf. Gebauer forthcoming) makes it difficult to imagine a conceivable scenario in which Offred could tell her story to someone else.

However, the narrator offers what seems at first sight a plausible solution to this conundrum: "I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance." (Atwood 1986, 49) Offred's metanarrative statement enables readers to naturalize her narrative account as an interior monologue which prevents her from turning insane. Seen in this light, Offred's act of narration constitutes her struggle for "psychological and emotional survival" as well as a means to "[self-rehabilitate] against the 'deadly brainwashing' [...] of the totalitarian state" (Howells 2006, 165).

As soon as Offred starts reflecting upon the communicative situation, though, it becomes obvious that reading this as an interior monologue is only partly convincing. "But if it's a story," she continues, "even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else." (Atwood 1986, 49) Yet it is impossible for readers to grasp Offred's narratee because, like her narrative account itself, this interlocutor exists only in her head, at least this is what the narrator makes her audience believe throughout most of the text:

But I keep on going with this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story, because after all I want you to hear it [...]. By telling you anything at all, I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are. (Ibid., 279)

Only in the last chapter of the novel do readers learn that Offred must have recorded her narrative on tape cassettes and that these recordings must have been buried on the site of the former city of Bangor in the U.S. state of Maine to be unearthed again about 200 years after the foundation (and subsequent collapse) of the Gileadean regime (cf. *ibid.*, 313). For Atwood's readers, then, the mystery of the novel's unusual first-person present-tense narrative situation is finally unraveled in the fictive "Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*." Offred herself, on the other hand, never comes to know that her secret story-telling practices will someday serve as a historical source: At the time of recording, she cannot know that there will one day be a real audience for her narrative. She cannot but consider the possibility of telling her story into the void.

What are the ethical implications of Atwood's use of metanarration in *The Handmaid's Tale*? Since Offred continuously evaluates the narrative events and reflects upon her act of narration, she enables readers to become witnesses not only of the heinous crimes against women, especially Handmaids, committed by the Gileadean government, but also of the narrator's violation of the restrictions imposed on women by the patriarchal state. Admittedly, by recording her story, Offred does not technically break the rule forbidding women to read or write. Nevertheless, she "defies Gileadean ideology" (Howells 2006, 166) by constantly pointing up flaws in the regime, thus refusing to take her role as a silenced and intimidated woman who must pay total obedience to the male rulers of the theocracy. Since Offred lets her anticipated listeners in on her secret resistance, she invites the narrative audience to complicity in her attempt to revolt against the patriarchal system. Realizing that they would hate to find themselves in a similar situation, readers will naturally empathize with the narrator's scorn against the Gileadean state and government. As for the ethics of the telling, therefore, *The Handmaid's Tale* not only questions those worldviews that facilitate the oppression of women and the heteronomy of their bodies; it also calls upon the individual's responsibility to oppose and defy such misogynist trends.

#### **4. Commercializing Surrogacy: Multiperspectivity in Joanne Ramos's *The Farm* (2019)**

While *The Handmaid's Tale* focuses exclusively on the negative aspects of surrogacy, *The Farm*, which seems to be loosely based on Atwood's narrative, seeks to present a more balanced view of the topic. Published in 2019, Joanne Ramos's debut novel is set in a future version of the U.S. state of Massachusetts in which surrogacy has become an integral part of a meritocratic and capitalist society. Most of the plot takes place at an institution named Golden Oaks, a baby farm where surrogate mothers, so-called Hosts, carry children for wealthy women, the Clients. Life at Golden Oaks is defined by

strict rules, a fixed social structure, and total surveillance. Hosts are usually recruited by so-called Scouts who recommend healthy and fertile, as well as obedient and conscientious, women as potential surrogate mothers. Once a woman has agreed to become a Host for the institution, she has to spend the entire pregnancy at this place, where she is mainly sealed off from her family and friends. Her daily routine consists of a series of mandatory medical appointments, as well as social and sports activities, all of which are considered beneficial for the fetus. If she fails to stick to her personalized schedule, she has to face sanctions and punishments. Hosts at Golden Oaks are, moreover, made to wear a digital wristband which tracks not only their activity levels and health conditions, but also their movement around the institution's premises. The data is evaluated by the staff of Golden Oaks, the Coordinators, who consult about the individual medical and social treatment of every Host in regular team meetings.

Unlike Atwood's novel, *The Farm* does not feature a homodiegetic narrator, but instead presents the events through the anonymous voice of a heterodiegetic narrator who grants readers alternating insights into the minds of various characters. The novel constantly switches between the perspectives of four women, each of whom is differently connected to Golden Oaks: Mae Yu, who is the chief executive of the institute;<sup>7</sup> Reagan McCarthy and Jane Arroyo, both of whom are Hosts at the baby farm; and Jane's elderly cousin Evelyn Arroyo, also known as Ate, who works as a Scout for Golden Oaks. *The Farm* invariably signals these shifts in focalization by means of its paratext: Every chapter is headed with the name of the character that serves as focalizer in this section of the narrative.

In staging multiperspectivity, the novel persistently invites readers to take the perspective of one of its female protagonists. This, in turn, provides the audience with a comprehensive picture of Golden Oaks. Readers learn the first facts about the clinic when the narrative informs them how Mae looks through a new stack of Host applications:

She glances through the photos on page one of each stapled packet and frowns. Most of the applicants are from the Caribbean, but she has enough of those. What she is low on are non-Black Hosts. Really, Mae muses, what she could use are a few more Filipinas – they are popular with Clients, because their English is good and their personalities are mild and service-oriented. (Ramos 2019, 41)

Combining psycho-narration, a conventionalized technique of representing consciousness in narrative fiction (cf. Cohn 1978, 21-57), with a referential use of the present tense that points to the here-and-now of Mae's mind (cf. Gebauer forthcoming), this passage provides immediate access to Mae's thoughts. The effect of this unfiltered insight into the character's mind is two-fold: first, it informs readers about Mae's opinion of the Host applicants. Second, and more importantly, it communicates to readers that Golden Oaks operates on a capitalist economic model which, from an ethical standpoint, is highly questionable, as it privileges white Clients by empowering them to choose their favorite Hosts from the sum of all applicants, the majority of whom are women of color.

This first impression is confirmed only a few pages later. In a conversation during which Mae tries to win Reagan, who is “Caucasian,” “pretty,” and “educated” (Ramos 2019, 42), as a Premium Host she hits the nail right on the head: “You worry that the other Hosts at Golden Oaks are mostly women of color. Am I right? You worry that there’s something potentially . . . exploitative afoot.” (Ibid., 48) Although this question is directed to Reagan, readers may probably feel that it addresses their own ethical reservations about the baby farm. Mae tries to settle Reagan’s, and thus also the reader’s, doubts by drawing on a notion from economics, namely that “free trade – voluntary trade – is mutually beneficial” (ibid.). To Reagan’s objection that, even in the context of free trade, there might be one party who does not have any better option than accepting an exchange which is actually a ‘bad deal,’ she confidently responds that “the trade [...] is still the best option available,” without which “the *one party* would be worse off” (ibid., 49; italics in the original). Finally, when she notices that she is on the brink of convincing her interlocutor, she emphatically asserts that “[f]or someone with drive, Golden Oaks really can be a gateway to a better life” (ibid.).

While Reagan seems to be convinced by Mae’s eloquent argument – at the end of the conversation she agrees to become a Host herself – readers cannot possibly overcome their misgivings. The reason for this is that another passage of psycho-narration clearly indicates that Mae does not tell Reagan everything, but “omits the fact that, except for Eve, no other Host has transitioned to a white-collar job” (ibid.). Readers thus learn that the majority of former Hosts remain in their lower-class position because, when their surrogate motherhood at the baby farm ends, they usually “tend to be hired for childcare or household services” (ibid.). By enabling them to access Mae’s thoughts, the narrative helps readers to see behind the façade of her promotional talk and discover the full truth about Golden Oaks. The example accordingly demonstrates that, even though *The Farm* does not feature an overt narrator as judgmental as Atwood’s *Offred* who might straightforwardly criticize the business model of Golden Oaks, the narrative’s oscillation between character dialogue and psycho-narration nevertheless encourages readers to take a critical stance toward the institution and its manipulative chief executive.

This effect is reinforced by the ways in which the narrative orchestrates the various points of view from which it presents the narrative events in order to steer the reader’s sympathy regarding the different characters. During her stay at Golden Oaks, Reagan grows increasingly wary again. Her renewed skepticism toward the baby farm arises from a series of events that cause her to question the institute’s integrity: When the biological mother of her child attends one of her doctor’s appointments via video conferencing, Reagan is not allowed to see the Client (cf. ibid., 2018, 80-83); besides, her roommate is denied a visit from her four-week-old daughter as a punishment for having caught a tick during a walk (cf. ibid., 104, 110-112), while another of her fellow Hosts is forced to have an abortion because the doctors have discovered that

her child will have trisomy 21 (cf. *ibid.*, 113-115, 129). Alarmed by these incidents, Reagan develops “[a]n unsettling sense that the Farm is a set piece created for the Client [...], and behind its pretty façade lies the truth. She’s just not yet sure what that is.” (*Ibid.*, 134)

But when Ms. Yu, as the Hosts call Mae, finally allows her to meet the mother of the baby inside her womb, Reagan’s mood lightens up:

Callie, someday not so far in the future, will take away her son. Reagan used to wonder about this: how she’ll feel after the delivery; if, having carried the baby for so long – felt him kick and turn and heard his heartbeat innumerable times – it will be hard to separate. But now Reagan knows it won’t be. She can tell that Callie is a good person, truly good, which is so rare. Callie will raise him right. And their story, the one Callie will tell her son, will begin with Reagan. (*Ibid.*, 186)

The extract recalls Reagan’s motive for becoming a surrogate mother at Golden Oaks. Like all the other Hosts, she is, of course, interested in the money because she would like to start a career as a professional photographer, a venture her father is unwilling to finance (cf. *ibid.*, 46). Her primary motivation, however, is the urge to do something good: As she mentions in one of her conversations with Mae before entering the surrogacy program, she “want[s] to carry a baby for someone who otherwise couldn’t have one” (*ibid.*, 47). Being aware of this, readers can probably empathize with the feelings of relief and contentment that Reagan experiences as she gets to know Callie: This woman is exactly that type of Client Reagan has wished for – a caring woman who truly desires a child and for whom Reagan is the “last chance of having a family” (*ibid.*, 182).

At least, this is what Reagan thinks. In the next chapter of the novel, readers meet Callie’s character again when she attends one of the Golden Oaks staff meetings – though this time she is not called Callie, but Tracey:

The receptionist announces the arrival of their guest. Mae tables the discussion and, minutes later, Tracey lopes into the room. She wears black jeans and a striped shirt, her hair no longer straightened but voluminous and wild. Large, crescent-shaped earrings tug at her earlobes. She looks much younger than she did when in character. (*Ibid.*, 199; my emphasis)

Since the chapter is focalized through Mae, who knows Callie’s true identity, the quotation does not explain that Tracey and Callie are the same person, which is why readers cannot yet recognize Callie’s reappearance. Up to this point, the name Tracey has not occurred in the novel at all, so that the alert reader starts wondering who this character is. The formulation “when in character,” however, indicates that they must have already encountered her as a different character, and this conjecture is eventually confirmed when Mae reveals that Tracey is an actress from Seattle whom she hired as a Stand-In for Reagan’s Client.

At first reading, the example creates an effective surprise, largely due to Ramos’s use of multiperspective focalization and present-tense narration.<sup>8</sup> Since Tracey’s character is first introduced in a chapter which presents the events exclusively from Reagan’s perspective, readers are initially made to believe that she is Reagan’s Client, Callie. Only in the next chapter in which

Mae serves as the focalizer do they learn that Tracey is actually an actress whom Golden Oaks engaged as Reagan's fake "dream client" in order to "make carrying the baby a meaningful experience for her" (ibid., 200). It is Ramos's use of present-tense narration that brings about this moment of surprise: Given that the present is the only narrative tense that can feign synchronicity between the narrative events and the act of reporting these events (cf. Gebauer forthcoming), it incites readers to feel as if they had direct access to the here-and-now of a character's consciousness (were the narrative written in the retrospective past tense, we would probably expect a more revealing point of view). Just as Golden Oaks has deceived Reagan, so too does the narrative's present-tense discourse lead readers astray. By making readers share firsthand the feeling of deception that Reagan must experience when she finds out the truth (cf. Ramos 2019, 224), Ramos's narrative encourages its audience to strongly sympathize with the trusting Reagan and share her anger and distress toward the manipulative and apparently unscrupulous Mae.

The 'deception scene' perfectly illustrates how the ethics of the telling can influence the ethics of the told, as Ramos's juxtaposition of different perspectives tends to divide the characters of *The Farm* into the categories of 'ethically sound' (Reagan) and 'ethically flawed' (Mae). Considered in its entirety, however, the novel refrains from such clear-cut categorizations. For, toward the end, even characters like Mae develop a moral consciousness: feeling pity for Jane's precarious situation as a Filipino immigrant who has to raise her baby daughter Amalia on her own, she hires this Host of Golden Oaks as her own surrogate mother and nanny, thus giving her and Amalia a financially secure place to live. In her review for *The Guardian*, Dina Nayeri (2019, n.p.) objects that the ending of *The Farm* "seems almost to pardon Mae": "In the final pages," she argues, "Ramos works frantically to scrub Mae clean – a pang of guilt here, a sudden desire for babies there – but the reader is left unsatisfied after all that supervillainy" (ibid., n.p.). But Nayeri's discontent is only one possible reaction to the plot's surprisingly positive closure. One could equally read the ending of the novel as an attempt to create a more complex character in Mae, who does not, after all, seem as ruthless as readers will likely have imagined her. For, even though she buys into a meritocratic and capitalist system, she still has the urge to help those who are exploited by this system.

Whichever reading one takes, though, the ending of *The Farm* is definitely thought-provoking, as it leaves readers wondering about the ethical implications of Ramos's text. Overall, however, compared with *The Handmaid's Tale*, Ramos's novel provides an outlook on a possible future of surrogacy that is a good deal more positive than Atwood's horror vision. Although in Ramos's narrative the concept is still fraught with negative connotations such as the commodification of women's bodies as well as the social inequality between different classes and ethnic groups, it nevertheless represents an arrangement to which a woman independently and voluntarily commits. In contrast to

Atwood's *Offred*, it seems that Ramos's female protagonists could still choose another life – a life which would be better in some cases and worse in others.

## 5. Conclusion

Drawing on Phelan's contention that, in any narrative, the ethics of the telling and the ethics of the told usually interact, my readings of *The Wall*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *The Farm* have sought to demonstrate that the ethical potential of contemporary speculative fiction unfolds primarily in the interplay between narrative content and narrative mediation. In this respect, my narratological analyses have shown that this interplay varies from narrative to narrative. In Lanchester's novel, the focus on different themes highlights a different semantics for each narrative form. Depending on whether one chooses to read the novel as an ecological dystopia or a state-of-the-nation narrative on Brexit, Lanchester's use of second-person present-tense narration can be conceived of as an invitation either to become immersed in the bleak storyworld or to feel included in the narrator's exclusionary community. While the ecocritical reading incites readers to think about their responsibility to save the planet for the sake of future generations, the allegorical one encourages them to reflect upon the consequences of national isolationism in a globalized world. The ethical dimension of *The Wall's* content thus determines the ethical implications of the narrative strategies deployed in the novel.

This relation between the ethics of the told and the ethics of the telling is inverted in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Rebelling, albeit silently, against the misogynistic practices of the Gileadean government, Atwood's autodiegetic narrator does not shy away from evaluating the narrative events critically and from reflecting upon her position as a woman oppressed and abused by a patriarchal society. *Offred's* metanarrative discourse thus opens an ethical dimension which would be largely neglected in a more neutral presentation of the hypocritical theocracy. The same holds for Ramos's novel, yet with a reverse effect. By staging multiperspectivity, *The Farm* compares and contrasts different views on surrogacy without taking a clear position itself. Instead, it leaves it to the reader to weigh up the different positions and thus to overcome the novel's ethical indeterminacy.

Nevertheless, however different their ethical implications, Lanchester's, Atwood's, and Ramos's novels share a similar purpose. All three narratives evoke a model for the world which makes us realize that today's society seems preoccupied with current and future consequences of climate change while ignoring the many other problems the world faces. These include, among others, globalization, the oppression of specific social or ethnic groups, and simple human greed, as well as the pursuit of political power, economic growth, and technological progress. At first sight, these issues do not relate to climate change, yet they influence the way we lead our lives, and thus also our



ecological behavior. Speculative novels like *The Wall*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *The Farm*, which do not exclusively deal with climate change, enable us to see that the underlying cause of that change is not just a lack of what Timothy Morton (2010) refers to as “the ecological thought” – the awareness that our human actions have a significant impact on the environment. The fundamental problems of the Anthropocene are far more intricate, and the recognition of this complexity is probably the most important ethical outcome of reading contemporary speculative fiction.

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Dr. Carolin Gebauer  
Bergische Universität Wuppertal  
Fakultät für Geistes- und Kulturwissenschaften  
Anglistik/Amerikanistik  
Gaußstraße 20  
42119 Wuppertal  
E-mail: [gebauer@uni-wuppertal.de](mailto:gebauer@uni-wuppertal.de)

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Trexler's *Anthropocene Fictions. The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (2015) covers more than 150 climate-change narratives, the majority of which were published after the turn of the millennium.

<sup>2</sup> However, speculative fiction ought not to be confused with science fiction, McHale's prime example of that type of narrative fiction which, by definition, generates models for the world. Atwood (2012, 6) even draws a neat distinction between the two genres: "What I mean by 'science fiction' is those books that descend from H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*, which treats of an invasion by tentacled, blood-sucking Martians shot to Earth in metal canisters – things that could not possibly happen – whereas, for me, 'speculative fiction' means plots that descend from Jules Verne's books about submarines and balloon travel and such – things that really could happen but just hadn't completely happened when the authors wrote the books."

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly enough, this ambiguity of the "doubly deictic *you*" (Herman 1994, 381 and passim; italics in the original) is not given in the German translation of *The Wall* (cf. Lanchester 2019a). The reason for this is that the translator Dorothee Merkel clearly opted for the first reading of the second-person pronoun *you*, translating it as "man" instead of "Du."

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that Bekhta (2017, 109) distinguishes 'we'-narration from what she defines as 'we'-narrative proper, that is, the "performative act of the creation of the collective [...] that expands the epistemological and cognitive possibilities of first-person narration," thus constituting a new narrative form.

<sup>5</sup> The novel's topicality already manifests itself in the acclaimed success of its recent Hulu adaption, which has been running for three seasons since 2017, with a fourth season currently in production, as well as Atwood's award-winning sequel *The Testaments*, published in 2019. In addition to these expansions of *The Handmaid's Tale* universe, some recent narratives by other authors like Joanne Ramos and Christine Dalcher have obviously been inspired by Atwood's novel: Ramos's *The Farm* (2019), which will be discussed in greater detail in the next section of this essay, seizes on the topic of surrogacy, whereas Dalcher's *Vox* (2018) builds on the subject of the disenfranchisement of women.

<sup>6</sup> The fictive historical notes at the end of the novel speculate that Offred was the Handmaid of Commander Frederick R. Waterford, a "highly placed [...] participant in the first of the top-secret Sons of Jacob Think Tanks, at which the philosophy and social structure of Gilead were hammered out" (Atwood 1986, 318); however, this conjecture is never unequivocally confirmed in the text (cf. *ibid.*, 319-322).

<sup>7</sup> It is probably no coincidence that Mae's name could be construed as a further intertextual reference to another dystopian novel, namely Dave Eggers's *The Circle* (2017), whose protagonist is called Mae Holland.

<sup>8</sup> I take the term *multiperspective focalization* from Nünning / Nünning (2000, 43-46), who distinguish three types of multiperspectivity in narrative fiction: multiperspective narration, multiperspective focalization, and multiperspective structure.