

Negotiating Stories in the Anthropocene

The Case of Nathaniel Rich's *Losing Earth*

It is almost a trope in contemporary discussions on the Anthropocene to call for new narratives that are able to convey the scale of the ecological crisis. When does a narrative become new, however? In this article, I build on Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck's theory of narrative in culture to develop a preliminary answer to that question. I first explore the field of Anthropocene discourse and chart the ways in which stories about the ecological crisis can depart from traditional narrative templates. Novelty, from that perspective, is a function of the complexity of narrative's engagement with existing stories, genres, and motifs. To exemplify this approach, I focus on Nathaniel Rich's nonfiction book *Losing Earth* (2019), which reconstructs the early days of the climate change debate in the 1980s. In my reading, Rich's work fails to do justice to the complexity of the Anthropocene because it falls back on a conventional narrative structure – the tragic plot – and it makes use of an actantial structure that neatly separates heroes and villains. By discussing the shortcomings of Rich's account, I emphasize the centrality of narrative form in negotiating the Anthropocene in both fiction and nonfictional discourse.

1. Introduction*

The Anthropocene brims with stories. From stories of natural catastrophes – imagined through the lens of fiction or channeled by the media – to grim chronicles of species extinction and environmental devastation: in this presumed 'age of man' in which humanity's carbon footprint threatens to stamp out the diversity of life on Earth, storytelling is thriving. After all, there is something eerily narratable about disaster, as the oldest stories that have been handed down to us in written form – the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the Book of Genesis – testify with their flood myths. Narrative deals with change, and more specifically with change that affects human (or human-like) characters profoundly. No wonder the Anthropocene, with its threat of increasingly frequent and extreme weather events that bring in dramatic change and disrupt human communities, acts as a magnet for story.¹

Yet there have been calls for 'new' stories. In *The Great Derangement* (2016), Indian writer Amitav Ghosh influentially laments the limitations of storytelling within the culturally dominant genre of the novel. For Ghosh, the novel – a genre that developed in close proximity to the industrial revolution and modernity – is unable to address a phenomenon as conceptually elusive, spatio-temporally distributed, and morally complex as the Anthropocene. The logical conclusion of Ghosh's reasoning is that writers need to find ways to circumvent these limitations by experimenting with the medium of story. Likewise, in *Uncivilisation*,

the manifesto of the Dark Mountain Project (a network of environmentally engaged writers), Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine (2009, n.p.) argue that it is “time to look for new paths and new stories, ones that can lead us through the end of the world as we know it and out the other side.” What exactly is a new story, though? The idea is anything but clear-cut. New to whom, and in what respect? Perhaps most importantly, new for what purpose? Would that novelty help translate the bland and unemotional metaphor of humanity’s ‘impact’ on the planet into an experienced reality? Would novelty influence readers’ environmental attitudes and drive belief change, as some scholars have posited (cf. Trexler 2015) and other scholars have attempted to prove empirically (cf. Schneider-Mayerson 2018)?

If there is one discipline that can evaluate the claims surrounding the Anthropocene and the need for new stories, it is narrative theory, and particularly narrative theory in its “contextualist” form, which looks at the interactions among stories, formal devices, and their cultural context.² Adopting the context-sensitive approach outlined by Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck (2017), this article charts some of the challenges involved in narrative’s confrontation with the Anthropocene and the specter of anthropogenic climate change. Herman and Vervaeck use the metaphor of “narrative templates,” derived from Anne Harrington’s (2008) work, to discuss persistent narrative patterns – for instance, those having to do with genre. “Revenge tragedy” is a template, in that it carries certain historical associations and expectations of emotional progression. Novelty arises when narrative combines templates in unexpected ways, or puts pressure on and alters existing templates, or rejects the dominant template for thinking about a given topic. Herman and Vervaeck discuss these processes as instances of “narrative negotiation.”

My first goal in this article is to survey the narrativity of Anthropocene discourse, discussing how the Anthropocene concept itself presents a proto-narrative structure and how judgments of novelty can be linked to the complexity of the narratives that address the climate crisis. To flesh out the idea of complexity, my second step will be to briefly summarize Herman and Vervaeck’s approach and cross-fertilize it with a conceptual model that has emerged in an ecocritical context – Hubert Zapf’s (2001) account of literature’s “cultural ecology.” Third, I will put these ideas to the test by analyzing *Losing Earth. The Decade We Could Have Stopped Climate Change* (2019), a nonfiction book by U.S. writer Nathaniel Rich that reconstructs the early years of the climate change debate, and how the negotiations for a legally binding international agreement broke down in 1989. *Losing Earth* is the reworked and expanded version of an article – titled “Losing Earth: The Decade We Almost Stopped Climate Change” – that took up an entire issue of *The New York Times Magazine* in August 2018. I single out Rich’s work for its high profile and wide influence – at least going by the many critical reactions to Rich’s piece – and because its nonfictional nature allows me to overcome what I see as the fictional bias of many discussions in contemporary narratology, particularly with regard to the narrative imagination of the climate crisis.³ So-called climate fiction or cli-fi (fiction that deals with climate change at

the level of plot and theme) is certainly an important platform for confronting the ethical and epistemological stakes of the Anthropocene, and it has been the subject of valuable work in an econarratological vein by scholars such as Erin James (2015) and Alexa Weik von Mossner (2017).⁴ But fiction is not the only meeting place for narrative and Anthropocene discourse: looking at nonfictional texts can shed light on the broader circulation of story, including how templates derived from literary fiction may structure discussion of real-world issues.

The impact of these nonfictional narratives is more culturally pervasive than that of climate fiction, which has a relatively limited readership, in terms of numbers but also – and more importantly – in terms of the readers’ socio-political positioning. As Matthew Schneider-Mayerson (2018) discusses, the audience of climate fiction tends to fall on the liberal side of the spectrum and is largely already aware of the significance of the ecological crisis. The narratives, and narrative templates, that underlie the broader nonfictional discourse revolving around the climate crisis deserve attention in their own right. Indeed, the bottom line of my reading of Rich’s book is that, despite a compelling set-up and strong writing, it fails to depart from existing narrative templates in ways that strike the reader (at the very least, this reader) as innovative. Not without some irony, this account of failed climate change negotiations cannot fully or adequately negotiate the complexity of the Anthropocene at the level of narrative form. This shortcoming paves the way for the fourth and final step of my argument, where I turn to the importance of bridging the gap between theme and formal strategies in narratives that engage with a phenomenon as multifaceted as the Anthropocene. Not only does narrating the Anthropocene pose a cultural and representational challenge, but it involves – crucially – developing formal strategies that adequately capture the scale and ethical ramifications of humanity’s impact on the planet.

2. Storied Pathways into Anthropocene Discourse

“Geology of Mankind,” an article by Paul Crutzen (2002), the Dutch chemist who popularized the term *Anthropocene*, opens as follows: “For the past three centuries, the effects of humans on the global environment have escalated. Because of these anthropogenic emissions of carbon dioxide, global climate may depart significantly from natural behaviour for many millennia to come.” (Ibid., 23) Where there is change over time, there is at least the beginning of story. The concept of the Anthropocene neatly distinguishes between a background of natural processes and a figure – humankind – that rises to the role of protagonist at a certain point in geological history. Though the exact cut-off point is heavily debated (was it the industrial revolution? the development of the atomic bomb? or did it happen much earlier in human history, with the first attempts to farm

the land?), the dramatic shift in humanity's fortunes remains uncontested. Promoted from an animal species among many to a standout hero, humans receive their own geological era: what could be more tellable than that?

The 'elevation' of humankind to a geological force is the skeleton of what I call the 'Anthropocene proto-narrative,' which has humankind as its sole protagonist, involves a fundamental transformation in humans' relationship with the geological history of the Earth, and backgrounds ethical and political considerations. This is, of course, a simplified reading of a concept that has become caught up in interdisciplinary crossfire between the natural sciences, where the term *Anthropocene* originated, and the humanities and social sciences, where scholars have been quick to highlight the flaws of the scientific debate.⁵ In particular, scholars in the latter camp have criticized the indiscriminate use of the biologically grounded category of 'humanity' and how it sidelines differences in moral responsibility as well as economic and political power (cf. Crist 2013; Moore 2017; Malm 2018). If the Anthropocene takes on a degree of narrativity by evoking a dramatic change in humanity's position vis-à-vis our planet, the linearity of that proto-narrative is deeply undercut and problematized by writers who argue that humanity is not a unified agent, but an aggregate of inequalities derived, ultimately, from colonialist and capitalist exploitation. The notion of a shift reflecting humanity's 'impact' on the planet papers over the violence involved in those historical processes – a violence that extends from marginalized human subjects to the nonhuman animals that are becoming extinct or dwindling in numbers as a result of habitat loss. Through its scientific abstraction, the Anthropocene proto-narrative leads to oversimplification and even banalization of the predicament human societies are facing. This, perhaps, explains why we need new stories, and points to a concrete way in which we can understand the novelty of narratives engaging with the ecological crisis. The Anthropocene is an unprecedented tangle of human subjectivity, cultural assumptions, political decision-making, world history, and geological and climatological processes: to do justice to the complexity of that tangle, we need sufficiently sophisticated stories.⁶

'New' is, of course, a tricky concept: in the context of this article, I will approach it by drawing a link between novelty and complexity. There has been a great deal of interest in narrative and complexity lately (cf. the contributions in Walsh / Stepney 2018; Grishakova / Poulaki 2019). Broadly speaking, narrative scholars have tended to either identify complexity with the *formal* features of individual stories or asked whether stories in general may work analogously to complex systems in the physical and social world – where *complex system* is a scientific term for processes marked by deep nonlinearity and unpredictability.⁷ Keeping the formal and technical meanings of complexity in mind, I want to focus here on the complexity that results from narrative's intervention in the cultural field, an intervention that – I propose – forms the basis for judgments of novelty.

The plurality of stories surrounding the concept of the Anthropocene can be boiled down to shared schemata, strategies, motifs. Not all these elements of

story exist on the same level: some are skeletal structures, “metanarratives” – in Jean-François Lyotard’s (1984, xxiv) terminology – of technological progress and human exceptionalism (two ideas closely bound up with the proto-narrative I discussed above); some are references to culturally established stories (such as the flood myth in the Book of Genesis), genres (e.g., the epic in expressions like ‘the battle against climate change’), or motifs (for example, literary representations of grief in mourning the loss of a glacier); some are fully fleshed-out narratives, such as those we find in the genre of climate fiction. In the next section, I attempt to specify the ways in which narrative may put pressure on these templates and thus complicate the linearity of the Anthropocene proto-narrative.

3. Narrative and the Cultural Ecology

No act of storytelling exists in a vacuum; every narrative emerges in dialog with other narratives that are handed down by a certain culture. This is the starting point of Herman and Vervaeck’s “theory of narrative in culture,” which straddles a series of articles (cf. Herman / Vervaeck 2009, 2016, 2017). Here I will build on the latest of these articles as the most comprehensive presentation of their model to date (cf. Herman / Vervaeck 2017). In terms of intellectual lineage, Herman and Vervaeck combine Pierre Bourdieu’s (1990) sociological account of the field of cultural production with Stephen Greenblatt’s (1988) New Historicist poetics of culture, with key influences from narrative theorists such as Ansgar Nünning (2009), Arthur Frank (2010), and Liesbeth Korthals Altes (2014).

The centerpieces of Herman and Vervaeck’s (2017) account are the concepts of circulation and negotiation, both of which work at multiple levels. By “circulation,” Herman and Vervaeck refer to the transmission of individual narratives, generic templates, and motifs. Circulation is always relative to a certain “field,” in Bourdieu’s sense: the social context as it is shaped by institutional as well as material constraints. Some narratives (e.g., in the West, Homer’s *Odyssey*) have extremely wide circulation, others are influential only within particular periods or social groups. A more abstract form of circulation involves the transmission of motifs or generic forms. Recurring motifs – e.g., returning home after a long absence or the descent into the underworld – circulate widely across cultures and areas of societal discussion, but their exact significance is the product of an interaction between individual stories and the broader cultural field. The same applies to generic forms, such as the quest narrative or the Gothic novel: the meanings and expectations surrounding genre are deeply shaped by context and by how the story as a whole engages with socially relevant themes.

This engagement is what Herman and Vervaeck call “negotiation,” in itself a highly versatile concept. In general terms, negotiation refers to the way in which narrative *acts* within a certain field. Negotiation may “involve tensions and conflicts,” as Herman and Vervaeck point out, but “these need not at all be resolved

or even tempered in the course of the process” (ibid., 619). Not all narrative gestures of negotiation have a clear-cut resolution: for Herman and Vervaeck, touching upon a certain theme or problem is in itself a form of negotiation. On a formal level, narrative negotiation involves adopting, and in some instances adapting (that is, reinterpreting and reworking), existing motifs and patterns. Think about the motif of catastrophe: within the field of, say, apocalyptic Christian thinking, stories of catastrophe hold out a promise of radical renewal and transcendence. This is the way in which the predicted end of the world is negotiated by such narratives. By contrast, in the field of today’s debate on the ecological crisis, catastrophe may be construed as an effect of political indecisiveness and thus feature in narratives that seek to render what it will be like to live in a world tragically reshaped by climate change. Alternatively, an experienced catastrophe (as opposed to an imagined one) may be part of a first-person narrative that lays out how the narrator, confronted with a dramatic flood or violent bush fire, came to grasp the reality of the otherwise abstract idea of climate change. In broad strokes, stories negotiate meaning by embedding culturally circulating ideas, values, as well as allusions to other stories in concrete scenarios of human interaction: the selection and combination of such cultural elements performs the narrative negotiation.

Thus, every narrative that addresses, more or less directly, the ecological crisis is an act of negotiation of existing cultural narratives, including the proto-narrative of the Anthropocene as the story of humanity’s becoming a geological agent. Not all forms of negotiation are equal, though. This is where Hubert Zapf’s (2001) discussion of literature’s cultural ecology can make an important contribution to the model developed by Herman and Vervaeck (2017). Zapf’s (2001, 85) main claim is that literary texts can act as an “ecological force within the larger cultural system,” by which he means that literature can inform the understanding of ecological relations that underlies a culture. Running counter to an ecocritical tradition that sees literature either as offering access to pristine ‘nature’ or as directly mirroring environmental issues, Zapf foregrounds the specificity of literature’s negotiation of ecological themes. To do so, he argues that what distinguishes literary texts from other text types is the self-consciousness and sophistication of their intervention in the cultural field – a point that Zapf couches in the language of complex systems theory (cf. ibid., 92). This literary intervention can follow three different routes, which Zapf calls “cultural-critical metadiscourse,” “imaginative counterdiscourse,” and “reintegrative interdiscourse” (ibid., 93). Metadiscourse is defined as the “representation and critical balancing of typical deficits, contradictions and deformations in prevailing political, economic, ideological and utilitarian systems of civilisatory power” (ibid.); put otherwise, metadiscourse provides illuminating commentary on tensions inherent within a culture’s dominant understanding of the nonhuman world. Counterdiscourse, by contrast, *questions* culturally dominant ideas by bringing to the fore what is “marginalised, neglected or repressed by [...] systemic realities” (ibid.). Finally, interdiscourse works toward reducing the gap between distinct cultural fields and fusing ideas that exist in separate cultural subsystems, even as

– Zapf points out – this operation may create new tensions. Metadiscourse, counterdiscourse, and interdiscourse are “procedures,” in Zapf’s terminology, through which literary texts may act in the cultural system by virtue of their unique complexity – that is, their ability to speak to multiple cultural issues and draw insightful connections between them.

Zapf’s discussion does not focus on narrative, as Herman and Vervaeck’s does, but the vocabulary it offers can help specify the possibilities of narrative negotiation – a concept that remains somewhat vague in Herman and Vervaeck’s account. Remember that, for Herman and Vervaeck, merely bringing up a certain topic in narrative is a form of negotiation. However, if we want to understand the complexity of a narrative – as well as its perceived novelty – it is useful to distinguish between stronger and weaker forms of negotiation: Zapf’s categories of meta-, counter-, and interdiscourse allow us to do that. While these forms of engagement with the cultural system do not always *resolve* tensions in imaginative terms, they can shed new light on a certain subject and help reappraise it in a way that may influence and advance the broader discussion. Zapf’s argument centers on literature, but I don’t see meta-, counter-, and interdiscourse as the exclusive province of traditional literary genres: reframing the discussion in terms of narrative brings into view multiple interactions between genres and media, both fictional and nonfictional, in today’s cultural landscape. At the same time, Herman and Vervaeck’s framework emphasizes, more clearly than Zapf’s does, how narrative’s engagement with a cultural field is tied to an imagination of form, through the patterns, motifs, and strategies that become bound up with certain ideological positions. As Meir Sternberg’s (1982) “Proteus Principle” posits, the formal choices made by a storyteller do not *determine* the ideological agenda of a narrative: the same formal technique may support vastly different ideological positions. This does not imply that form is irrelevant to ideology, however. As my analysis of Rich’s *Losing Earth* suggests, narrative negotiation is deepened by adopting a form that *matches* the themes and views expressed by the storyteller. Making a complex intervention in culture means, invariably, making an intervention at the level of the conceptual form through which a certain problem is framed.

4. “Their Story, and Ours”: Failed Negotiations in *Losing Earth*

Essentially, *Losing Earth* is an account of the early days of the climate change debate in the United States: covering the decade from 1979 to 1989, it reconstructs how the issue of global warming gained political traction, made it to the upper echelons of two administrations (under the Reagan and George H. W. Bush presidencies) but eventually failed to result in a legally binding international agreement to limit carbon dioxide emissions. That agreement could have been reached at an intergovernmental conference in Noordwijk, near The Hague, in

November 1989; but as a result of the opposition of senior officers in the Bush administration, particularly the Chief of Staff, John Sununu, the agreement fell through. This narrative is based on extensive interviews conducted by Rich with funding from the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. Rich is a journalist and also the author of two novels, the latter of which – *Odds Against Tomorrow* (2013) – is often mentioned in the context of climate fiction. *Losing Earth* is, clearly, not a novel but a painstakingly researched and lucidly written nonfiction book; here, however, I will abstract from questions of historical accuracy and examine it as a narrative entering the field of Anthropocene discourse.

One of the book's most prominent motifs, right from the first sentence, is what I will call the 'lateness' motif: "Nearly everything we understand about global warming was understood in 1979. It was, if anything, better understood" (Rich 2019, 3). To many readers, this will come as a surprise: this historical perspective is rarely invoked in today's climate change debate, and it may seem safe to assume that the science of climate change has made significant strides over the last two decades. According to Rich, it hasn't. The rhetorical flourish of this opening suggests that the story about to be told doesn't enjoy broad circulation in the field of Anthropocene discourse: the lateness of political action against climate change thus goes hand in hand with the urgency of telling this narrative. The effect of such statements – and there are many throughout the book – is to draw an implicit comparison between three scenarios: the world of 1979, the world of 2019, and a counterfactual world of 2019 in which effective climate change legislation is in place. This comparison shows that the debate on climate change has made little progress in the space of forty years, and indeed in some respects it has reverted to a more narrow-minded and parochial conversation. The science of anthropogenic climate change, Rich argues, was essentially complete by the 1980s; politically, the issue was considered a safe, bipartisan one, receiving support from many members of the Republican party. Despite being occasionally held back by political indecisiveness, opportunism, and vacuous rhetoric, the climate change debate didn't have to face organized denialism before 1989; even oil companies were actively researching the topic. Also in the "Introduction," Rich writes:

During that decade the obstacles we blame for our current inaction had yet to emerge. The conditions for success were so favorable that they have the quality of a fable, especially at a time [2019] when so many of the veteran members of the climate class—the scientists, policy negotiators, and activists who for decades have been fighting ignorance, apathy, and corporate bribery—openly despair about the possibility of achieving even mitigatory success. (Ibid., 5f.)

I refer to this comparison as the 'lateness' motif because Rich's suggestion is that any decisive political action governments might take today (and we know how difficult that is proving) comes forty years late: climate change mitigation will inevitably be less effective and more demanding – in both monetary and human terms – than the measures that could have been put in place in the 1980s. In the book's afterword, Rich returns to this motif: "More carbon has been released into the atmosphere since November 7, 1989, the final day of the Noordwijk conference, than in the entire history of civilization preceding it" (ibid., 180).

The counterfactual world of 2019, in which these emissions would have been reduced significantly, speaks to the enormous social and existential consequences of the inability to strike a legally binding deal in 1989.

The ‘lateness’ motif thus offers a form of counterdiscourse, rejecting the terms of today’s conversation on climate change – which is divided along party lines, at least in the United States – by presenting a situation (now long gone) in which there was substantial political consensus on the significance and stakes of the issue. The counterdiscourse also opposes the assumption that public debates progress linearly, from the recognition of a problem to action: effectively, Rich is suggesting that the discussion on climate change has regressed instead of advancing. In one of the passages quoted above, Rich deploys an allusion to the literary genre of the fable to render the fanciful quality of that consensus, seen from the perspective of 2019. *And yet*, even under those ideal conditions, reaching an agreement proved impossible, and the actual world of 2019 sharply diverged from the counterfactual world of 2019. This is where Rich’s counterdiscourse shades into metadiscourse.

Throughout *Losing Earth*, Rich develops a pessimistic argument whereby the failure of the negotiations in 1989 was more than the product of a specific historical juncture; it arose from a tragic flaw in human nature, something akin to what Aristotle, in the *Poetics* (1995, 71), would have called “hamartia,” a fateful error that signals human fallibility and drives the tragic plot.⁸ In the afterword, Rich articulates this flaw as follows: “Everybody knew” what the ramifications of inaction would be (Rich 2019, 189), but everybody failed to act upon that knowledge. The conflict between knowing and acting is another hallmark of tragedy, just like humanity’s fundamental error.⁹ Later in the afterword, Rich attempts to specify this error further: “we have trained ourselves, whether culturally or evolutionarily, to obsess over the present, fret about the medium term, and cast the long term out of our minds, as we might spit out a poison” (ibid., 200f.). Remarkable here is the emergence of the we-form, which hovers between public opinion in the U.S., Western nations, and humanity in general.¹⁰ As noted by many commentators within the Anthropocene debate, the first-person plural pronoun is deeply problematic in that it suggests a species-wide perspective that is anything but experientially self-evident (cf. Chakrabarty 2009, 220) and also downplays the vast differences in material and moral responsibilities vis-à-vis the ecological crisis between, for example, the Western world and developing countries (cf. Crist 2013). Moreover, the lack of specificity of Rich’s we-form contrasts sharply with the meticulous detail of his historical account, even as – as we’ll see in a moment – the ‘universal’ first-person plural pronoun does seem to channel the notion that there is no position outside of the ecological crisis, no safe vantage point from which we may view the crisis *without being entangled with it*. This kind of metadiscourse places the events told by Rich’s book in a broader perspective, pointing beyond specific historical responsibilities, toward a collective failure of human morality – a universal scope that also goes hand in hand with tragedy.

A literary genre thus emerges and shapes, implicitly, the metadiscourse of Rich's narrative: it is the tragedy of how "we" almost reached an agreement that would have avoided the worst consequences of anthropogenic climate change, until "our" shortsightedness prevailed and made the titular "loss" of our planet more and more likely.¹¹ Tragedy is thus the literary template that underlies Rich's account and feeds into the pessimism arising from the triangulation of past, present, and a counterfactual scenario. In this way, it is suggested that the nature of the climate crisis is not merely historical but "existential," to use a term that Rich deploys frequently, in universalizing statements such as: "It no longer seems rational to assume that humanity, encountering an existential threat, will behave rationally" (Rich 2019, 5). This use of the word "humanity" involves many layers of abstraction, equating the politicians who sabotaged the Noordwijk deal with our species at large – a conceptual leap that is typical of the Anthropocene proto-narrative, as we've seen above, and that Rich doesn't problematize.

A related tragic trope evoked by Rich is the notion of a *kairos* or opportune moment that fails to materialize due to human fallibility, indecisiveness, or their combination.¹² Bart Keunen (2011, 116) uses the term *kairophobia* to refer to the hero's inability to seize the *kairos* – a shortcoming that Keunen sees as central to modern narrative, particularly in the tragic genre (Shakespeare's Hamlet being a prominent example of this inability). In Rich's account, it is humanity as a whole that suffers from *kairophobia*, even as the story's heroes do their best to overcome this tendency. Indeed, if Rich's pronouncements in both the introduction and the afterword evoke the sense of predestination and universalizing framework typical of tragedy, the chapters leading up to the Noordwijk conference (the *kairos* moment) adopt a somewhat different vocabulary. Here, too, Rich's account is in search of a literary template, but it is less fleshed out in terms of genre than in terms of what Algirdas J. Greimas (1976) would call "actantial roles" – that is, the structural functions fulfilled by different characters with a view to advancing the plot toward its tragic ending. This story, we are told, needs a hero and a villain. The hero, or rather the two heroes, are easy to identify: they are Rafe Pomerance, the lobbyist and environmentalist who managed to put climate change on the agenda of two White House administrations, and James Hansen, the scientist who spoke vehemently about climate change in a landmark congressional hearing. These figures personalize the failure Rich writes about in the introduction:

That we came so close, as a civilization, to breaking our suicide pact with fossil fuels can be credited to the efforts of a handful of people [...]. They were led by a hyperkinetic lobbyist [Rafe Pomerance] and a guileless atmospheric physicist [James Hansen] who, at severe personal cost, tried to warn humanity of what was coming. They risked their careers in a painful, escalating campaign to solve the problem, first in scientific reports, later through conventional avenues of political persuasion, and finally with a strategy of public shaming. Their efforts were shrewd, passionate, robust. And they failed. What follows is their story, and ours. (Rich 2019, 9)

Again, the emergence of the we-form seeks to create a sense of sharing and identification between Rich's readers and the two heroes of the narrative. The adoption of standard actantial roles is thematized in the chapters through Al

Gore's efforts to stage the climate change debate in dramatic congressional hearings that – according to Gore's calculus – would be able to sway public opinion: “As Al Gore and Tom Grumbly understood in 1980, the climate crisis, like most human dramas, has heroes, villains, and victims.” (Ibid., 194) Rich appears to take Gore's advice in the book. Yet, if the heroes of the story are clear-cut, the antagonist's role remains more diffuse. When Hansen's congressional testimony is censured by an anonymous White House officer, this development foreshadows “the emergence of an antagonistic—a nihilistic—force” (ibid., 119). Later in the narrative, John Sununu – George H. W. Bush's Chief of Staff and the first high-profile climate change skeptic to enter Rich's account – is cast as the main antagonist. It is through Sununu's opposition and the efforts of a science adviser appointed at Sununu's recommendation, Allan Bromley, that the Noordwijk conference fails to lead to a legally binding agreement. By extension, it is the Bush administration that takes on the villain's role, along with the petroleum industry, which – as Rich reminds us – launched its well-funded and coordinated misinformation campaign in the wake of the Noordwijk conference. Yet a strong suspicion arises, particularly while reading Rich's framing of the narrative, that the antagonist's role may be spread out across several characters, perhaps even across the unspecified “we” periodically evoked by the narrator – a collective failure to face up to “our” responsibilities.

This idea introduces what is perhaps the most radical aspect of Rich's meta-discourse: several passages announce a fusion of actantial role, with the heroes, the antagonist, and the victims of this Anthropocenic narrative blurring into one another. Here is an exchange between Gore and his staff director, Tom Grumbly: “Grumbly demurred. ‘There are no villains,’ he said. ‘Besides, who's your victim?’ ‘If we don't do something,’ said Gore, ‘we're all going to be the victims’. He didn't say: *If we don't do something, we'll be the villains too.*” (Ibid., 73; italics in the original) The italicized portion is a rare narratorial intervention emphasizing the breakdown of traditional narratological functions as the characters confront, materially and morally, the destructive consequences of anthropogenic climate change. Perhaps this is a story with no real heroes, only villains and victims brought together under the heading of an unstable, species-wide “we.”

Thematically, Rich's narrative takes on board this idea by integrating what I will call the ‘complicity’ motif. Rich writes: “A full reckoning [of the crisis] requires understanding the degree to which all of our lives, even those of the moral paragons who walk among us, rely on the extraction and combustion of long-buried organic matter—of the earth's ancient dead.” (Ibid., 196f.) He adds, in a more personal vein: “How do we begin to make sense of our own complicity, however reluctant, in this nightmare? I know that I'm complicit; my hands drip crude. Hell is murky.” (Ibid., 193) This sense of moral murkiness emerges powerfully in the conclusion, where the urgency of the climate change question is presented as a “moral imperative” from which none of “us” remain exempt. This final appeal begins to trouble the linearity of the Anthropocene proto-narrative, with humanity as an unproblematized collective agent having an impact on the planet: the impact, we realize, is not an external event devoid of moral

implications, because humanity's 'promotion' to the rank of geological force jeopardizes the survival of our own species – and the stability of the planetary system. Here the metadiscourse borders on a form of counterdiscourse, with the separation between human action and a background of geological and climatological forces as its polemical target.

Crucially, however, a number of tensions remain open between the narrative templates adopted by Rich's account and its rhetorical and ideological agenda. These tensions appear to weaken the meta- and counterdiscourse by introducing a marked disconnect between narrative form and theme. At one level, we may wonder if the universalizing dimension of the tragic plot – and the defeatist notion of inherent human fallibility that goes with it – do not detract from the identification of historical responsibilities and undermine the moral appeal of the last pages. If the failed negotiations related by Rich are a tragedy, they are one that closes the door on the possibility of catharsis, a Beckettian drama of parochial misunderstanding more than an ennobling take on humanity's flaw. Yet the aggrandizing rhetoric of Rich's comments ("Their efforts were shrewd, passionate, robust. And they failed. What follows is their story, and ours") appears to shift the focus away from the urgency of addressing the current impasse, as well as the necessity of holding those involved in this failure to account.¹³ But perhaps more fundamentally, the thematized fusion of actantial roles (the hero and the villain being complicit in the crisis) is *not* taken up at the level of narrative form. In Rich's narrative, despite the ambivalence introduced by the we-form, the dividing line between the heroes (Pomerance and Hansen) and the villains (Sununu, the Bush administration, the petroleum industry) remains narratologically intact: the form of the tale fails to do justice to the image of moral entanglement it seeks to advance in thematic terms, a shortcoming that has repercussions on the depth of the book's negotiation of our Anthropocenic predicament.

Again, this is not a point about the historical accuracy of Rich's account, whose praise for Pomerance's and Hansen's valiant efforts is perfectly understandable. This is a point about how the imaginative form of the narrative, through the relatively conventional templates it adopts (the tragic plot and the hero-antagonist split), clashes with what is – from my perspective – its true subject-matter: namely, humanity's material and moral implication in an existential cataclysm in which it is (as the narrator spells out in passing) both a villain and a victim, though nations and individuals may be villains and victims to varying degrees. Put baldly, Rich's narrative fails to translate the 'complicity' motif into form, which limits the scope of its intervention in the field of Anthropocene discourse. *Losing Earth* does put some pressure on utilitarian ways of thinking about the nonhuman world and, simultaneously, on a linear understanding of the Anthropocene proto-narrative. But the meta- and counterdiscourse it offers through the frame remain detached from the conventional templates involved in the story, and Rich's rhetoric is weakened in the process.

5. Conclusion: Form and the Limitations of Storytelling in the Anthropocene

There is a great deal to be learned from the failure of Rich's narrative to make an innovative intervention in Anthropocene discourse. As recent work in the field of New Formalism argues, form is crucial to bridging the divide between literary representation and social and political issues. Far from being an exclusively literary or artistic concern, form inheres within the social world and shapes the rhythms and hierarchies of human interaction at multiple levels (cf. Levine 2015). As I have argued more at length in *Narrating the Mesh* (2021), form underlies human-nonhuman relations and determines the stakes of our entanglement with climate change. If we want to fully rise to the challenge of the Anthropocene, we need to think about it as a *formal* problem, where the word 'formal' denotes the cognitive and affective schemata required to envisage a phenomenon that is fundamentally multifaceted and complex, and whereby the human subject seems to loop, epistemically and morally, into nonhuman realities that Western culture has taught us to consider external to ourselves.

In a recent article, Zoltán Boldizsár Simon (2018) also engages the limitations of storytelling vis-à-vis the Anthropocene. I share Simon's interest in the plurality of the narratives that circulate in Anthropocene discourse, but I do not share his conclusion that "storytelling domesticates the Anthropocene predicament" (ibid., 13), at least if we take the "domestication" to be a necessary consequence of narration. Story does carry the risk of domestication, as evidenced by Rich's falling back on a traditional actantial framework and plot type (the tragic plot) to tell the story of how "we could have stopped climate change" (from the book's subtitle). Likewise, Rich's focus on a single storyline greatly downplays the plurality of Anthropocenic narratives, reducing it to the familiar mediatised drama of U.S. politics. However, a more playful approach to form might be able to address these limitations of storytelling and meet the demand for "new stories" voiced by Kingsnorth and Hine in the Dark Mountain Project manifesto. This approach can be found in fiction that multiplies storylines on a global scale (Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* is an excellent example), or fragments and de-centers temporal progression (e.g., Dale Pendell's *The Great Bay*), or assigns actantial roles to nonhuman figures (such as Area X in Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach trilogy).¹⁴ This kind of experimentation with narrative forms and schemata is necessary to deepen story's negotiation of the Anthropocene, enhancing the possibilities of the counter-, meta-, and interdiscourse identified by Zapf. While the first two of these procedures are present in Rich's *Losing Earth*, as my analysis has highlighted, their impact – and therefore the complexity and novelty of the narrative – are diminished by the use of conventional story templates, which work against the grain of the 'complicity' motif, and of the book's explicit thematic agenda.

We may tend to associate unconventional and challenging narrative forms with literary fiction, but these need not be limited to fiction. Cymene Howe and

Dominic Boyer's documentary *Not Ok* (2018), which focuses on Okjökull, a glacier in Iceland that was recently lost to climate change, is narrated by the mountain underlying the glacier – an irruption of a nonhuman voice that shames and ridicules human indecisiveness far more effectively than Rich's moralizing conclusion.¹⁵ The anthropomorphization of the glacier is a fictional device in the fundamentally nonfictional genre of the documentary, and points to the value of experimentation as we look for an adequate language to convey the scale and stakes of the Anthropocene. Closer to Rich's book in terms of genre, but much more experimental in approach, is Jonathan Safran Foer's *We Are the Weather* (2019), which adopts a hybrid, essayistic form to explore the contradictions and tensions of the self vis-à-vis the ecological crisis: in *We Are the Weather*, fragments of autobiographical narrative and argumentative discourse come together, complexly, to render the complicity that is only hinted at thematically by Rich. Indeed, positioning story in a cultural field, via Herman and Vervaeck's theory of narrative negotiation, allows us to see how every instance of storytelling, regardless of fictional status, participates in a cultural dynamic and may potentially leave a mark on it. But whether that happens depends on the convergence of themes, rhetorical devices, and narrative form, and Rich's reliance on the tragic plot appears unhelpful – not just in terms of incentivizing real-world action, but also (and, from my perspective, just as importantly) in terms of giving satisfactory expression to the complexity of our cultural and material crisis. I am aware, of course, that nonfictional narratives are subject to different criteria and expectations than fictional ones, and what works in novels may not necessarily work in a journalistic account like Rich's *Losing Earth*. However, as Safran Foer's example demonstrates, there is a good deal of flexibility within the category of nonfiction; even when the intended audience makes a more experimental approach impractical, it is important to create critical awareness of how narrative can impose a literary template on 'facts,' and how this template may distort or bias our understanding of the issue at hand.

Further, even if departure from conventional stories and schemata via experimentation with form alleviates Simon's concerns over the inevitably "domesticating" nature of story in the Anthropocene, we should not lay aside the idea of narrative's limitations completely. Surely, narrative is a culturally and cognitively privileged "tool for thinking," in David Herman's (2003) formulation, and scholars in science communication are stressing the potential of narrative for translating abstract scientific models – like those surrounding climate change – into an experience that may influence readers cognitively and affectively (cf. Dahlstrom 2014); but the complexity of the Anthropocene is such that no single cognitive tool can fully capture it. What we need is a *combination* of tools, methods, and approaches for negotiating our position vis-à-vis nonhuman realities. There might be value, then, in the breakdowns of narrative, in slippages and even failures like those of Rich's *Losing Earth*, because – when framed and understood correctly – they point to the need for a more comprehensive, interdisciplinary, and transmedial approach to the problem of channeling the Anthropocene. It is not a coincidence that the most stimulating negotiations of the Anthropocene

cross-fertilize storytelling with other genres and semiotic modes, integrating the visual language of science (e.g., in Rivka Galchen's *Atmospheric Disturbances*) and essayistic discourse (in Safran Foer's 2019 book as well as works by another American writer, Thalia Field) to hint at the blind spots and inadequacies of narrativity. Such blurring of generic and semiotic boundaries might be useful, and even essential, in times that are challenging so fundamentally the ontological categories handed down to us by Western modernity.

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¹ In this article I use the terms *story* and *narrative* interchangeably, to denote any storytelling medium or practice.

² For more on contextualist narratology, cf. Roy Sommer’s (2007) overview and a collection on narratology and ideology recently edited by Divya Dwivedi, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Richard Walsh (2018).

³ Ron Meador (2018) discusses the reception of Rich’s piece in detail.

⁴ See also a special issue of *English Studies* and a collection, both co-edited by James and Eric Morel (2018, 2020). Most of these essays, particularly in the collection, focus on fictional narratives. For more on climate fiction, cf. Trexler (2015).

⁵ Zoltán Boldizsár Simon (2018) discusses these interdisciplinary debates in detail. I will return to Simon’s article in the conclusion.

⁶ Cf. Jens Kersten’s (2013) similar call for a new “political anthropology” based on the appreciation of complexity in the Anthropocene.

⁷ For more on complex systems, cf. Baranger (2000).

⁸ It is worth noting that the *New York Times Magazine* article from which *Losing Earth* developed contained several explicit references to “human nature,” particularly in the epilogue. The last paragraph of the article reads as follows: “Human nature has brought us to this place; perhaps human nature will one day bring us through. Rational argument has failed in a rout. Let irrational optimism have a turn. It is also human nature, after all, to hope” (2018, n.p.). Rich must have decided to leave out these generalizing references in the book version in response to critical feedback on the article (cf., e.g., Klein 2018). Nevertheless, this universalizing impulse is implicit in many of Rich’s statements in the introduction and afterword.

⁹ Cf. Gellrich (1984) on conflict as a central element of the tragic plot.

¹⁰ We-narrative has been the subject of much narratological work recently; cf., e.g., Bekhta (2017; 2020). Of course, in terms of the link with tragedy that I draw in my reading, the we-form is also characteristic of Greek tragedy, where it conveys the communal viewpoint of the chorus. The chorus of Greek drama provides external commentary on the action and may embody different values from the characters’. By contrast, Rich’s “we” is closely aligned with the narration, leaving little room for a sense of polyphony (in Bakhtin’s [1981] sense) to emerge.

¹¹ While Rich does not explicitly present his account as a tragedy, the lead text for the 2018 article on the *New York Times* website reads “a tragedy in two acts.”

¹² On the philosophy of the kairos, cf. Shew (2013).

¹³ The epigraphs in Rich’s book contribute to the grandiosity of the framing, in part through religious language: the first epigraph comes from the Book of Proverbs; the second from a poem by Robinson Jeffers, “Cassandra” (a tragic figure whose name also appears in one of the chapter titles); the third quotes the lyrics of a song – Tiny Tim’s “The Other Side” – that closes with the words “All the world is drowning / To wash away the sin.”

¹⁴ I write about these novels in *Narrating the Mesh* (Caracciolo 2021); on Ozeki’s work, cf. also Caracciolo (2019). In a stimulating article, Alexa Weik von Mossner (2014) voices reservations about the temporal scale of Pendell’s *The Great Bay*, which – she claims – hampers identification due to the absence of an overarching protagonist. For Weik von Mossner, Pendell’s narrative “is interesting for what it tries to achieve but at the same time remarkably unengaging” (2014, 205). In my view, we should strive to overcome this lack of engagement and appreciate Pendell’s radical formal experimentation, which constitutes a highly effective way of conveying the deep temporality and enormous stakes involved in the ecological crisis.

¹⁵ The trailer of *Not Ok*, which also features the speaking mountain, can be found here: <https://www.notokmovie.com/> (01.10.2020).