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Climate Change and the Ironies of Omniscience in Rumaan Alam's *Leave the World Behind*

Abstract: Scholars in ecocriticism have frequently argued that the environmental crisis calls for an overhaul of the realist novel, which is inadequate at conveying the global scale and ramifications of climate change and related anthropogenic disruptions to the Earth system. In this article, I explore how a centerpiece of nineteenth-century realist fiction, the omniscient narrator, may be reimagined to speak to the imaginative challenges of climate change. As the future becomes fragmented in a multiplicity of alternative scenarios (ranging from local disasters to societal collapse), personal and collective anxieties come to the fore. In my case study, Rumaan Alam's 2020 novel *Leave the World Behind*, the narrator's apparent omniscience stages the uncertainties of our climate future through an ironic device: knowledge of the catastrophe experienced by the characters is displayed but also withheld from the reader, leading to an ambivalent, and largely unreadable, narratorial stance. Omniscience is thus used to undermine the possibility of affirming human mastery and control over the unsettling events that are playing out in the storyworld. In this way, *Leave the World Behind* demonstrates the realist novel's ability to open itself up to the weird realities of the climate crisis.[1]

Key terms: uncertainty, realist novel, ecological crisis, knowledge, Anthropocene fiction

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Introduction

If there is one formal feature that is almost universally associated with the realist novel in the nineteenth-century tradition, it is the so-called omniscient narrator. Contemporary narrative theory has deconstructed and to a large extent dismantled the category of 'omniscience', which refers to a bundle of narratorial abilities, such as moving at will across narrative time and space and revealing the inner life of various characters (see Nelles 2006). But even a theorist who has vigorously critiqued the notion of omniscient narrator, Jonathan Culler, admits that "it is in the effects of [the] central works of the realist tradition that the best case for the pertinence of omniscience could be made" (2004: 32). Culler is thinking of Victorian authors such as George Eliot and Charles Dickens, whose realist novels demonstrate what Culler calls omniscience in the sense of "synoptic impersonal narration" (2004: 26), which involves "the production of wisdom through the multiplication of perspectives and the teasing out of intricacies in human affairs" (2004: 32). In a famous passage from Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, for instance, the narrator takes a step back from the novel's protagonists and addresses the reader directly. Yes, the narrator remarks, the small-town drama staged by the novel is trivial in comparison to the heroes of tragedy (Eliot 1985: 363). However, the narrator's reasoning continues: "I share with you [the reader] this sense of oppressive narrowness; but it is necessary that we should feel it, if we care to understand how it acted on the lives of Tom and Maggie—how it has acted on young natures in many generations" (Eliot 1985: 363). The narrator suggests that understanding the workings of society requires attention to feelings, situations, and individuals that are far from the elevating idealizations of the literary tradition. Influenced by scientific and, particularly, evolutionary thinking, Eliot takes something akin to what Culler calls a "synoptic" perspective.[2] This quasi-scientific distance from the novelistic subject-matter, along with the free-ranging, moralizing commentary, are the most distinctive traits of the Victorian omniscient narrator.

This article explores the afterlives of the omniscient narrator as literary realism is challenged, disrupted, and enriched by climate change – a reality that can no longer be captured through the grid of the novelistic conventions established in the course of the nineteenth century. That much is a widely shared starting point for debates on literary realism and climate change: Amitav Ghosh writes about the shortcomings of what he calls "serious fiction" in *The Great Derangement* (2016: 9) – a strand of fiction that he problematically keeps separate from

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2 For more on Eliot and Victorian science, see Gillian Beer's (2000) influential study.

speculative and science fiction.[3] Even critics whose work is at odds with Ghosh's understanding of serious fiction, such as Mark McGurl (2012) and Kate Marshall (2015), call for a substantial overhaul of the concept of realism in times of climate change. The assumption is that the rationalist underpinnings of nineteenth-century realism, and particularly its fixation with the 'plausible' or 'verisimilar' (as Western modernity understands these concepts), fail to come to terms with climate change. Instead, as Selmin Kara and Cydney Langill (2020) advocate, realism has to be 'weirded', which also involves cross-fertilizing realist representation with genres and strands of fiction that Ghosh would ostracize from the domain of serious fiction. In particular, Kara and Langill turn to weird fiction, the Lovecraftian genre relaunched by writers such as Jeff VanderMeer and China Miéville, for an example of how fiction "brings us in direct confrontation with the limits of our own knowledge and inflates emotion in order to suggest that reality is larger, stranger, and more complex than we might imagine" (2020: 64).[4] "Weird realism", they add, "is in direct conflict with scientific realism, which is about a systemic, knowable explanation of the world" (Kara and Langill 2020: 64). If the synoptic remarks of Eliot's narrator in *The Mill on the Floss* build on the possibility of a "systemic, knowable explanation" of society, weird fiction – and the weird realism theorized by Kara and Langill – resist such explanation.

In a different context, Jon Hegglund (2020) also discusses weird realism as an effective response to the challenges of anthropogenic climate change. As nonhuman-oriented theorists such as Jane Bennett (2010), Timothy Morton (2010), and Steven Shaviro (2012) have argued, the ecological crisis causes a breakdown of the ontological categories that underpin Western thinking – first and foremost, the opposition between nature and culture, which can no longer be neatly separated. For Hegglund, weird realism is a form of realism attuned to this ontological disruption: in VanderMeer's "Southern Reach" trilogy, for example, the nonhuman seeps into the first-person narrative of a seemingly human character, or narrative progression is tied to the agency of a mysterious coastal region known as "Area X". By crisscrossing the human-nonhuman divide, these fantastical elements do not turn away from reality but render the weirdness of living in times of ecological breakdown.

The link between Kara and Langill's and Hegglund's arguments should be clear: the "systemic knowledge" discussed by Kara and Langill derives from the confidence of Western culture in a system of ontological oppositions that the climate crisis is rendering unusable and morally problematic (in that these dichoto-

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3 See Ursula Heise's (2018) review of Ghosh's book for a convincing critique of his conception of serious fiction.
4 Benjamin Robertson's (2018) study of VanderMeer's fiction also focuses on the epistemological value of the weird vis-à-vis the climate crisis.

mies support notions of human mastery and exceptionalism that have led to the current crisis, via Western colonialism, capitalism, and extractivism). Conventional realism – the realism practiced by the Victorian novel – also becomes untenable, and literary fiction turns to other modes and genres, such as weird or science fiction, to get a grip on a shifting reality.

Against this background, it may seem surprising that the so-called omniscient narrator is making a comeback in what Alex Trexler (2015) has influentially termed 'Anthropocene fiction' – that is, fiction that engages with climate change and the other ecological disruptions that define the present moment.[5] After all, in Victorian fiction omniscience was the expression of a relatively stable worldview and value system, which derived from cultural discourses that included science (as in Eliot's novel) and religion. It is not a little paradoxical to say that narratorial omniscience may be used against the grain of these certainties, to probe and question Western categories. That is what happens in this article's main case study, Rumaan Alam's novel *Leave the World Behind* (2020), and arguably in other works of Anthropocene fiction which I will not be able to discuss here, such as Richard Powers's *The Overstory* and James Bradley's *Clade*. Indeed, Alam's use of narratorial omniscience is not an isolated case but part of a return of the omniscient narrator in contemporary fiction that has been examined in a narratological vein by Paul Dawson. Before turning to Alam's novel and what I call its ironies of omniscience, I will build on Dawson's discussion in order to arrive at a better understanding of how a seemingly omniscient narrator may undermine, rather than reinforce, the reader's certainties.

Climate Uncertainty and the Return of Omniscience

By definition, an omniscient narrator is a narrator who knows more than the characters in a narrative. In the eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century novel, this superior knowledge created an overlap between two categories that narrative theorists working in the wake of structuralism have tended to keep separate: the narrator and the author. The omniscient narrator is 'authorial' – in Franz Stanzel's (1984) terminology – in that he or she asserts control over the narrative, by evaluating it ethically and emotionally and also by drawing the reader's attention to its rhetorical constructedness. For that reason, the boundary between authorial and narratorial roles is highly contested in narrative theory: some scholars have

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5 'Anthropocene' is a term popularized by Earth scientist Paul Crutzen (2002) for the current geological epoch.

recently argued against the need to differentiate between these roles unless the narrator is also a fictional character in the diegesis (see Patron 2021).

In *Return of the Omniscient Narrator*, Paul Dawson sidesteps some of these difficulties by positing that omniscience is not an intrinsic feature of a certain narrator, but rather a "rhetorical performance of narrative authority" (2013: 19). By focusing on narratorial performance, Dawson shifts the focus from an essentialist understanding of the narrator to the way in which an image of the narrator is both projected by the story and interpreted by readers. In some instances, readers will be encouraged to focus on the common ground between the narratorial persona and the flesh-and-blood author. Indeed, this is the route taken by Dawson, who reads the return of omniscience in contemporary fiction in light of a broader cultural trend – namely, the loss of public authority and cachet of the novelist in contemporary society. In Dawson's argument, narratorial omniscience is strongly aligned with the author's figure: "the narrative voice of contemporary omniscience is symptomatic of the broad anxiety within the literary field over the cultural capital of literary fiction, and hence the public authority of the novelist" (2013: 9).

My interest in omniscience in this article sees it as the response to a different kind of anxiety, one not linked to the novelist's role in society but to an uneasy imagination of a climate-changed future. Climate science presents us with a mosaic of possible futures, which reflect a large number of assumptions and hypotheses, at two levels: first, how the physical Earth system will change as a result of human activity; and, second, how governments around the world will tackle these changes. Scientists often distinguish between 'pessimistic' and 'optimistic' scenarios, but that binary does not do justice to the vast range of possibilities, which go from localized devastation to downright societal collapse. Being confronted with this range of scenarios destabilizes our personal and societal confidence in the future – our 'ontological security', to use Anthony Giddens's (1990) phrase. It also means that scientific prediction and knowledge face a fundamental challenge, which plays into the hands of climate change deniers or skeptics, as has been noted multiple times (see Lewandowsky et al. 2014). These groups have been quick to seize the impossibility of making exact predictions about the future to cast into doubt scientific knowledge itself. For those of us who retain confidence in science, the breakdown of prediction involves an unusual degree of uncertainty and, possibly, anxiety, which may well have important personal and societal ramifications, as psychologists are increasingly recognizing (see, e.g., Taylor 2020).

The return of the omniscient narrator can be seen as a response to this radical uncertainty of the future. I do not mean that in a straightforward way, however. The omniscient narrator I wish to discuss is not a know-all and moralizing figure providing readers with the future knowledge and reassurance that they so pain-

fully lack. That solution, while theoretically possible, would be problematically nostalgic: it would paper over the uncertainty rather than address it directly, by pretending that the authority embodied by the omniscient narrator of the Victorian novel can be productively reasserted in today's world. Instead, a far more effective response to uncertainty is one that heeds the call of weird realism: the omniscient narrator is 'weirded' and becomes a figure that boasts, but also withholds, knowledge of the future. Readers are thus confronted with the limitations of their knowledge rather than spoon-fed with false certainties. In that way, the conventions of nineteenth-century realism might be fruitfully adapted to our climate-changed reality.

It is important to keep in mind Dawson's argument that omniscience is not an intrinsic feature of a narrator, but rather a matter of textual performance. David Rodriguez (2018) uses Morton's (2010) concept of 'strange stranger' to discuss the narratorial performance of two well-known works of Anthropocene fiction, Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* and Richard McGuire's comic book *Here*. For Rodriguez, the narrators of these narratives remain elusive and indeterminate: they are in control of the narrative, but they challenge an anthropomorphic understanding of narrative voice. Conceptualized as 'strange strangers' or uncategorizable entities, these are weird narrators that overturn anthropomorphic and anthropocentric assumptions by repeatedly resisting reading strategies attuned to more conventional forms of realism. The narrator of *Leave the World Behind* is a case in point, but their presence is much more obtrusive than in the works examined by Rodriguez, and the ironies of narratorial omniscience far more poignant, as my discussion will show.

Of the types of contemporary omniscience identified by Dawson, the one that comes closest to Alam's narrator is perhaps the "polymath" narrator of works by Don DeLillo and Richard Powers, who draws legitimacy from "nonliterary paradigms of knowledge, from evolutionary science to the forces of history" (Dawson 2013: 137). Thus, Powers's *The Overstory* – a novel often invoked in discussions of literature and the ecological crisis (Caracciolo 2020; Lambert 2021) – features a narrator who is eerily proficient in the vocabularies of medical science, artificial intelligence, and botany. However, unlike Powers's polymath narrator, whose knowledge derives from established extraliterary discourses, the source of the narrator's omniscience in *Leave the World Behind* remains mysterious and uncoupled from any specific human or human-centric vantage point. This is an ironic effect in that it consistently undermines the reader's confidence in and sympathy for the narrator, creating ambiguity and fueling the indeterminate menace that pervades the narrative affectively. The narrator's weird omniscience thus becomes a way of deepening the narrative's confrontation with the uncertainty of the present: its radical ambiguity encourages the reader to develop psychological

tools for living with a future that is, just like the novel's narrator, irreducibly strange, unreadable, and possibly more-than-human or even nonhuman.[6]

"She Did Not Know That": Withholding Knowledge in *Leave the World Behind*

The premise of *Leave the World Behind* is familiar enough: a middle-class couple from New York City rents an Airbnb in Long Island for a vacation with their teenage children. Through its isolation and luxury, the vacation home provides much-needed solace from the routines of city life. What promises to be a peaceful vacation is abruptly interrupted, a few chapters into the novel, by the unexpected arrival of the landlords, an elderly black couple. The first encounter between the two families is traversed by racial and social tensions: the renters, Clay and Amanda, first mistake the house's rightful owners for intruders, and then are troubled by the realization that G. H. and Ruth are much better off than they are. (G. H. works for a Wall Street firm.) Soon, however, those tensions recede into the background as the tidings brought by G. H. and Ruth sink in: there has been a major power outage in New York City, and the cellular network is down everywhere; the causes remain unclear. Feeling unsafe, G. H. and Ruth decide to drive to their home in Long Island, where the pantry is well stocked and the electric grid still functional. The resulting forced cohabitation brings the two families closer together and unites them against an elusive threat that, throughout the novel, is never named or identified. The characters speculate about a terrorist attack – there are multiple references to 9/11 – or a nuclear missile launched by Iran or North Korea, or a storm even more catastrophic than Hurricane Sandy. Climate change is a constant presence, too, adding to the menace that seeps through the novel: "The seas were said to be rising", Clay reminds himself (Alam 2020: 140).

The novel is able to create a pervasive atmosphere of dread that escalates as the uncertainty of the situation the characters are facing deepens their fears. Indeed, rather than a single catastrophic event, *Leave the World Behind* uses the underspecified disaster to evoke a sense of overlapping crises deriving from geopolitical tensions and humankind's devastating impact on the environment. Referencing the event that triggered the first World War, the narrator remarks that the "pace of things used to be slower. Now a nut didn't have to shoot an archduke;

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6 For more on contemporary fiction's engagement with climate uncertainty, see my discussion in Caracciolo (2022).

every day was a jumble of near-simultaneous oddity" (Alam 2020: 165). "[J]umble" denotes the way in which the possible causes of the disaster merge and compound one another in the characters' minds; "oddity" registers their emotional evaluation of the events they are witnessing. The sense of oddity is fueled by multiple moments that, without specifying the cataclysm, begin to reveal the true scale of the phenomenon the protagonists are experiencing. These moments are linked to both the nonhuman world and the intimacy of the human body. Rose, Clay and Amanda's daughter, spots hundreds of deer in the woods just behind the vacation home. Later, a number of flamingos appear, mysteriously, around the house's pool. They are described as "twisty and strange, ascending into the Long Island night, beautiful and terrifying in equal measure" (Alam 2020: 180). These incongruous visions convey the degree to which the catastrophe, whatever its exact nature, has destabilized the nonhuman world. The human body is unsettled, too, evoking perhaps the effects of radiation sickness: the characters start feeling ill, Archie – Clay and Amanda's son – realizes that his teeth are falling out, in an unsettling moment of body horror (Alam 2020: 194).

These epiphanies, which are artfully arranged by Alam in a crescendo, strongly recall Mark Fisher's discussion of the weird as resulting from "a sense of wrongness: a weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here" (2016: 15). Crucially, however, *Leave the World Behind* remains far from the scenarios of fantasy and science fiction – the two genres with which weird fiction shares conceptual space (Luckhurst 2017). There are no unspeakable monsters or cosmic conspiracy here, as in H. P. Lovecraft's 'old weird' writings and in more modern weird fiction by Jeff VanderMeer.[7] Instead, Alam's novel steers clear of any event that could be construed as physically impossible, supernatural, or fantastical. For all intents and purposes, this is a realist novel set in the recognizable landscape of Long Island, peppered with brand names and everyday things that will strike readers as commonplace. The sense of wrongness the narrative creates is all the more resonant because it is uncoupled from the generic templates of speculative fiction, which have taught readers to expect mysterious events – an expectation that to some extent 'naturalizes' their oddity.[8] These genres have also taught readers to expect a degree of resolution or at least narrowing down of the mystery, but that possibility is consistently denied here: by the end of the novel, the readers and the

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7 For more on the distinction between 'old' and 'new weird', see Noys and Murphy (2016).
8 See also Jan Alber's (2016: 50) account of how 'unnatural' (i.e., physically or logically impossible) events in narrative are conventionalized when they become part of genres such as the fable or science fiction.

characters are still completely in the dark as to the nature of the crisis unfolding in the storyworld.

Some readers will undoubtedly find that lack of closure frustrating. Other readers – and that is the interpretive route I am taking here – will learn to appreciate the novel *despite* the maddening lack of specificity of the cataclysm. No discussion of *Leave the World Behind* is complete without accounting for the narrator, however. The weirdness that surrounds the characters appears to inflect and orient (or perhaps stem from?) the act of narration itself. I have mentioned that the omens experienced by the protagonists come in an emotional crescendo. Parallel to this progression is another crescendo, with an initially reticent narrator becoming more and more obtrusive. The novel opens as follows: "Well, the sun was shining. They felt that boded well – people turn any old thing into an omen. It was all just to say no clouds were to be seen. The sun where the sun always was. The sun persistent and indifferent" (Alam 2020: 1). The family ("[t]hey") is here on the way to their Long Island vacation. The statement that "people turn any old thing into an omen" and the comment on the sun's "indifference" would seem to be the narrator's. While the narrator's cryptic and vaguely misanthropic remarks preface the narrative, the novel's early chapters follow the characters' thoughts and feelings through internal focalization. The narrator keeps a low profile, and the "rhetorical performance of narrative authority" (to quote again from Dawson 2013: 19) remains mostly subdued. It is only later, when the crisis that enfolds the protagonists starts picking up pace, that the ironies of the narrator's voice come into full view.

Through oblique comments and references, the narrator begins flaunting their superior knowledge. "A change", the narrator declares, "was upon them [the characters]; a change was upon it all. What you called it didn't matter" (Alam 2020: 122). Clearly, "[w]hat you called" the disaster matters a great deal to the protagonists, who are shown discussing and mentally dissecting it for pages and pages. What you call it is likely to matter to the readers, too, who will be hoping for an explanation that will help reduce the uncertainty staged by the narrative. As the protagonists and the readers seek to establish control over the crisis by naming it, the narrator dismisses their attempts as irrelevant. A few pages later, the narrator changes tactic. "I would feel better if I just knew what was happening", remarks Amanda (Alam 2020: 152). The narrator comments: "These words were not true, but she did not know that" (Alam 2020: 152). Here the narrator is affirming the superiority of their knowledge on two levels: knowledge of the nature of the catastrophe, and knowledge of the effects that a full revelation would have on Amanda's psychology. What is especially shocking about the narrator's condescending tone is that, despite claiming to know what is going on, they keep the reader in the dark throughout, and for reasons that are never specified or even addressed. This is, plainly, an omniscient narrator also in the sense – theorized by

Nelles (2006) – that it can roam freely in space and time: not only does the narrator have knowledge of the present, but they periodically offer us glimpses – suggestive but also frustratingly vague – of what is happening in other parts of the country, or in the future.[9]

As the novel advances and the protagonists' dread of uncertainty deepens, these teasing comments become increasingly frequent. When Rose disappears and it becomes clear that Archie's health condition is serious, the narrator remarks: "Maybe they [the characters] should feel only awe at life's mysteries, as children did" (Alam 2020: 189). It is hard to know what to make of such statements. The narrator's comment could be sarcastic: they could be adopting the point of view of child-like "awe at life's mysteries" only to ridicule it.[10] In that reading, the narrator is looking down on the characters and mocking their child-like lack of knowledge, their short-term thinking, their inability to adjust to a rapidly changing reality. There are echoes of cosmic indifference and nihilism in this stance, bringing to mind Michel Houellebecq's influential account of Lovecraft's weird fiction: "Few beings have ever been [as] impregnated, pierced to the core, by the conviction of the absolute futility of human aspiration [as Lovecraft]" (2006: 32). But while Lovecraft explicitly plays with a cosmic perspective from which human endeavors are pitiful and insignificant, we cannot be sure that Alam is doing the same, and that he is doing so in earnest. Indeed, the narrator could be offering "awe at life's mysteries" as a genuine coping strategy, implying that acceptance of uncertainty is a precondition for resilience and suggesting that the children, and Rose in particular, may be better suited to face the crisis than the adults. Some sections of the narrative do seem to cast Rose's independence in a more positive light than the adults' predictable and mindless behavior in the face of catastrophe.[11] Ultimately, however, the novel does not enable us to settle

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9 For instance: "Amanda did not know that the Laundromat was closed. She did not know that the Chinese man who ran it was inside the elevator that carried passengers between the turnstiles and the platform at the R train station in Brooklyn Heights, and he'd been there for hours, and he'd die there, though that was many hours in the future yet" (Alam 2020: 159–160). Rose "couldn't know, would never know, that the Thornes, the family who lived there, were at the airport in San Diego, unable to make arrangements since there were no flights operating domestically because of a nationwide emergency without precedent" (Alam 2020: 238).

10 For this account of irony as adopting a particular perspective (in this instance, that of child-like awe) in order to reveal the shortcomings of this perspective, see Currie (2010: 148–166).

11 See, for instance, this passage: "She didn't want to hide in bed. Rose didn't want to hide at all. She stood up and stretched as you might after a restorative night's sleep. She stretched her arms and legs, and they both felt powerful and alive. Rose walked to the window and tried to see into the trees. She wasn't sure what she was looking for, but she would know it when it appeared, and knew, too, that it would appear" (Alam 2020: 146).

on either the sarcastic or the earnest reading of the narrator's remarks. This fundamental ambiguity derives from the narrator's omniscience, which remains impervious and unreadable, an "egregious gap" in the narrative – to use Porter Abbott's (2013: 112) terminology – rather than the clear expression of a perspective (no matter how nihilistic) on human affairs.

The novel ends, appropriately enough, with a question mark that aligns the reader with the unknowing characters: "If they didn't know how it would end—with night, with more terrible noise from the top of Olympus, with bombs, with disease, with blood, with happiness, with deer or something else watching them from the darkened woods—well, wasn't that true of every day?" (Alam 2020: 241). This dismissive and flippant tone downplays the uncertainty faced by the characters – by reminding us that every day is uncertain – and frustrates the reader's desire to have at least some questions answered by the ending. The irony of Alam's narrator, then, is that its repeatedly flaunted omniscience goes hand in hand with the reader's persistent lack of knowledge, which works against generic conventions and expectations associated with the ending.

The omniscient narrator of the realist novel is an anthropomorphic figure that uses the discourses of science, religion, and morality to both legitimize his or her authority and guide the reader's interpretation of the plot. In *Leave the World Behind*, by contrast, the narrator's comments and allusions don't seem to correlate with any existing value or knowledge system. There are hints in the narrative that characters grown accustomed to the 'old' world – the world before this unspecified disaster – will never be able to cope with this new reality. Yet the narrator pointedly fails to display or spell out any alternative framework for understanding the world. Ultimately, the reader is invited to question the perspective from which the narrator speaks: why is the narrator so reticent about the causes and consequences of this disaster? Are they trying to shield us (readers) from a revelation that we wouldn't be able to accept? Are the narrator's claims to knowledge – to omniscience – even trustworthy? In this rare conjunction of narratorial omniscience and possible unreliability, the reader may even wonder whether this misanthropic narrator is human, or rather shouldn't be conceptualized – along the lines of Rodriguez (2018) – as a 'strange stranger' that defies categorization. These questions are, of course, unanswered and unanswerable.

What *Leave the World Behind* does, insistently, is ask the reader to put up with a weirdness that cannot be explained or explained away. This weirdness doesn't only exist at the diegetic level but affects the very act of telling this story as the narrator becomes more and more intrusive and enigmatic. This narrative strategy, which asks the reader to live with a radically unknowable future, may offer some form of training in accepting what one does not and perhaps cannot know (see Caracciolo 2022: 17–19). Omniscience thus becomes a "calamity form",

in Anahid Nersessian's terminology: a formal device that, despite being "profoundly anxiogenic", may invite us "to consider how literature […] provides alternatives to the wholesale voiding of imaginative possibilities for future worlds" (Nersessian 2013: 324). In *Leave the World Behind*, finding these "alternatives" requires reading between the lines, or against the grain of the narrator's cruel reticence: it requires attending to, and finding comfort in, the vitality of the non-human world (embodied by the deer and the flamingos) as well as the resourcefulness of Clay and Amanda's daughter, Rose.

Conclusion

It goes without saying that the future has always been uncertain. In a sense, the narrator of *Leave the World Behind* is right to ask, rhetorically: "If [the characters] didn't know how [the day] would end... well, wasn't that true of every day?" (Alam 2020: 241). Yet that question grossly downplays the differences between experiencing uncertainty within a world that appears ontologically secure and the more radical uncertainty brought into view by realities such as the climate crisis, which pose an existential threat to many communities around the world (especially in the Global South, but increasingly in the developed world as well). That the narrator appears so oblivious to the difference between those forms of uncertainty is one of the many ironies of Alam's novel. As the plot progresses, the narrator's posture becomes more dismissive and insensitive to the protagonists' predicament. It also becomes increasingly difficult for the reader to share the narrator's misanthropic comments, or to comprehend the value system from which those comments derive. Ultimately, the narrator appears unreadable, a 'strange stranger' that resists understanding and withholds knowledge in a cruel game with both the novel's characters and its readers. The omniscience of Alam's narrator, then, is not a straightforward attempt to redress the uncertainty of the ecological crisis, but rather an ironic commentary on the many unknowns that define the present moment.

So much of Anthropocene fiction engages with climate anxiety by offering a "fantasy of survival", in Pieter Vermeulen's (2020: 153) words: that is, it provides comfort by imagining that human society can reinvent itself after an apocalyptic event, and by spelling out the values on which that society would be founded. In Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, it is parental care that emerges as the first step towards a new social pact (Johns-Putra 2016); in Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*, another postapocalyptic novel whose protagonists belong to a traveling theater company, the arts play a similar role. Alam's narrative refuses such comforts: its omniscient narrator, despite being able to move freely in space and time

and repeatedly flaunting their superior knowledge, fails to embody or convey a value system that is alternative to the one that is falling apart. Readers are thus left on their own, in a no-holds-barred struggle with uncertainty that is intensified, rather than offset, by the narrator's omniscience. Some readers are likely to find this strategy bleak and depressing; but it is equally possible, as I have shown in my discussion of the novel, to find this narratorial stance empowering: rather than being guided towards a set of prefabricated, and consoling, meanings, the reader is encouraged to coexist with uncertainty in a way that may well prove cathartic. This is perhaps the literary equivalent of shock therapy, but – as I argue more fully in Caracciolo (2022) – its benefit may be a deepening of the reader's ability to live with the deep uncertainty of the climate future.

What I have called the weird omniscience of the narrator is instrumental in bringing about this effect. A well-known feature of the realist novel, omniscience is reimagined by Alam in a way that speaks to recent calls for an expansion of literary realism in the face of climate change. Alam's narrative, which is grounded in the mundane setting of the realist tradition, uses the narrator's strange voice to evoke a sense of mystery and radical ambiguity that departs fundamentally from the verisimilar of the realist novel. Importantly, it does so without giving in to generic templates – such as the conventionally fantastic or science-fictional – that may help the reader *reduce* or *explain away* the uncertainty. As a rhetorical performance, the omniscience of the narrator does not affirm an authorial value system but rather demonstrates the impossibility of adopting a stable value system in catastrophic times, and prompts readers to accept that impossibility. This effect is part of what Adeline Johns-Putra has discussed under the Benjaminian rubric of arrest or '*Stillstellung*' in contemporary climate realism: in Johns-Putra's words, "the reader [of the realist novel] is engaged on a journey, a journey that might productively be brought to a grinding halt" to speak to the climate crisis (2019: 258). The weird omniscience of the narrator is only one of the means through which contemporary realist fiction may stop readers in their tracks. But it is an important means, as I have argued here, because of how forcefully this ironic strategy stages the gaps and limitations of human knowledge vis-à-vis the climate crisis.

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