Notes for an econarratological theory of character — **Source link** ⧉

Marco Caracciolo

Institutions: Ghent University

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Abstract: Scientists and scholars in multiple fields have been discussing the current geological epoch under the heading of the "Anthropocene" – an era marked by the planetary impact of human activities (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000). The epistemological shift brought about by this notion exposes the latent anthropocentrism of narrative practices, raising a challenge taken up by narrative theorists such as Erin James (2015) and Alexa Weik von Mossner (2017) in the context of an "econarratology." In this article, I examine the prime suspect for anthropocentrism in narrative – namely, the notion of character as intrinsically human-like. My point of departure is A. J. Greimas's (1976) actantial model of narrative, which I revisit and revise in light of work in the field of ecolinguistics (Goatly 1996). I thus explore five strategies through which narrative may integrate nonhuman characters that challenge both anthropocentrism and the subject-object binary that anthropocentrism entails. I exemplify these strategies by discussing contemporary novels that deal with the Anthropocenic entanglement of humanity and the nonhuman world.

Keywords: Narrative, Contemporary fiction, Nonhuman, Ecocriticism, Anthropocene

1 Introduction

In *Vibrant Matter* (2010), a seminal contribution to an area of contemporary philosophy known as "New Materialism," Jane Bennett makes a case for the autonomy and productivity of matter. For Bennett, inanimate things are constitutively entangled with, and participate in, human activities. Bennett's work is part

*****Corresponding author: Marco Caracciolo,** Ghent University, Department of Literary Studies, Blandijnberg 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium, E-Mail: marco.caracciolo@ugent.be

of a wave of thinkers who have mounted philosophical arguments to unsettle the metaphysical primacy of the human. Theorists such as Karen Barad (2007), Timothy Morton (2010), or Steven Shaviro (2014) have taken aim at the notion – rarely articulated as such, but implicit in many of our behavioral and cognitive patterns – that humans have a metaphysical warrant to exploit nonhuman animals as well as matter (including the natural resources of our planet). In an edited collection, Richard Grusin (2015) grouped together many of these thinkers under the heading of the "nonhuman turn." The nonhuman raises a radical challenge to anthropocentrism and to the idea of human exceptionality, under-cutting binaries between (human) subjects and (nonhuman) objects. This is, broadly speaking, the philosophical project in which Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* is embedded. In the first chapter of her book, Bennett employs narrative to stage the breakdown of the subject-object distinction. She writes as follows:

> The strangely vital things that will rise up to meet us in this chapter – a dead rat, a plastic cap, a spool of thread – are characters in a speculative onto-story. The tale hazards an account of materiality, even though it is both too alien and too close to see clearly and even though linguistic means prove inadequate to the task. (2010: 3–4)

Bennett's appeal to the medium of narrative to bolster her case for the vital efficacy of matter is significant for several reasons. At one level, it testifies to narrative's power to demonstrate a philosophical argument in terms that are both concrete and affectively resonant. At the same time, Bennett is raising the possibility of using narrative against the grain of what Monika Fludernik (1996: 13) has called its "anthropomorphic bias": namely, narrative's tendency to foreground human protagonists, psychological causality, and human-scale temporality and spatiality. "The king died, then the queen died of grief," E. M. Forster's (1955 [1927]: 86) oft-cited example of plot, shows all the prototypical marks of the human, from human characters to mental causation ("of grief") to an inferred chronology that can be plausibly measured in human-scale time – days and months, not geological eras. Bennett's "speculative onto-stories" suggest that narrative may be able to move beyond this anthropomorphic bias. To understand how this is possible, we can consider one of Bennett's examples, a short story by Franz Kafka, "Cares of a Family Man" (2005 [1919]). The protagonist of this narrative is a mysterious entity called Odradek, which at first sight would seem to be a mere tool: "it looks like a flat star-shaped spool for thread, and indeed it does seem to have thread wound upon it; to be sure, they are only old, broken-off bits of thread, knotted and tangled together, of the most varied sorts and colors" (Kafka 2005: 428). But we soon discover that Odradek is able to hide, and even speak and laugh (its laughter sounding "like the rustling of fallen leaves"; 2005: 428), and that it will survive the narrator's children (hence the anxious "cares"

hinted at by the title). For Bennett, Odradek blurs the boundary between subjectivity and materiality, agency and passivity: "this animate wood exercises an impersonal form of vitality" (2010: 7).

Figures like Odradek challenge the first and perhaps most important pillar of narrative's anthropomorphism: its bias towards human or human-like characters. In an article co-authored with Lars Bernaerts, Luc Herman, and Bart Vervaeck (2014), we examined the cognitive and interpretive challenges raised by nonhuman characters (and more specifically, in the context of the article, first-person narrators). In the following pages I would like to extend that project, engaging with the notion of character head-on and discussing the ways in which narrative – and narrative theory – may attempt to extricate character from anthropomorphic conceptions. How can narrative elevate the nonhuman – material objects, but also large-scale processes such as globalization or the weather – to the position of a character? What are the limits and the possibilities opened up by this operation? These are key questions for what Erin James (2015) calls an "econarratology," a theory of narrative that foregrounds the interplay between narrative form and the environmental imagination. Econarratology, in James's 2015 book but also in work by David Herman (2014, 2018) and Alexa Weik von Mossner (2017), starts to move narrative theory beyond its anthropomorphic comfort zone.

This article contributes to these debates by developing a theory of character attuned to the interrelation of humans and nonhuman processes in the "Anthropocene," which is Paul Crutzen's term for the current geological era (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000). The Anthropocene is defined by the planetary impact of human activities, through various processes including the production of non-biodegradable materials and the release of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Not only do these processes disrupt the balance of many ecosystems, triggering large-scale species extinction, but they jeopardize the environment in which our species has flourished. Human history shapes, and at the same time is shaped by, geological and climatological phenomena (see Chakrabarty 2014). This is the fundamental interrelation that the concept of Anthropocene brings into view, and that Timothy Morton (2010: 28–33) captures by way of a metaphor, that of the human-nonhuman "mesh." If one seeks to understand how narrative engages with and conveys this interconnection, the notion of character – a key concept of narrative theory, and a bulwark of anthropomorphism – would seem to be an obvious and perhaps inevitable starting point. Broadly speaking, narrative tends to place human characters in the agentive position, while nonhuman realities (including nonhuman animals and natural landscapes or processes) are relegated to the position of objects: tools to further human ends, or a backdrop to human-centered events. This is a general trend and does not apply to the same extent to *all* narratives, of course. Appreciating the narratives that do put pressure on this anthropocentric

set-up involves reconceptualizing the notion of character and opening it up to nonhuman realities.

The resistance to an anthropomorphic understanding of character is not entirely new. In his path-breaking work on the Russian folktale, Vladimir Propp (1968 [1928]) was the first to develop a formal understanding of character, through the equation of character and "function": namely, the role a given character plays within a narrative arc. For Propp, a character could be a hero, a dispatcher, a helper, or a prize – all roles defined by semantic relations that were largely (though not completely) abstract in the sense of being independent from psychological factors. Propp's work was immensely influential in structuralist narratology. In a 1972 article, Seymour Chatman summarizes as follows the structuralist theory of character: "The structuralists wish to base their analyses strictly on what characters *do* in a story, not what they *are* – by some outside psychological measure" (1972: 57; emphasis in the original). The culmination of that structuralist approach is A. J. Greimas's (1976) actantial model of narrative, which does away with character as an inherently mimetic concept and prefers to talk about "actants" – a term that emphasizes the structural link between character and narrative-advancing actions. Effectively, this approach reduces character to a textual device, and therefore would seem to undermine the notion's inherent anthropomorphism. Does this mean that the theory of character I am developing can simply adopt the structuralist model? In section 2 of this article, I answer that question in the negative. The problem is that the structuralist approach, although it may seem to do away with the human subjectivity of character, is in fact deeply committed to the subject-object binary that philosophical work such as Bennett's destabilizes. Put otherwise, structuralist theories, by seeing character as a mere textual function, tend to *objectify* it. By contrast, a non-anthropocentric theory of character should resist the whole subject-object split and (to borrow Phelan's [2007] terminology) move beyond both a "mimetic," anthropomorphic approach to character and a purely "synthetic" understanding that sees it as an inert textual mechanism.

Developing this argument will require delving deeper into Greimas's actantial theory of narrative and spelling out why it is based on a dualistic conception of the world, and of language in particular. Andrew Goatly's (1996) seminal work on "green grammar" in the field of ecolinguistics will help me link dualism to a specific grammatical construction widespread in Indo-European languages – namely, the transitive sentence, with its clear-cut separation between a grammatical subject and a grammatical object. Greimas's actantial model relies on transitivity, and therefore cannot be adopted in the context of an econarratology without substantive modification. In section 3, I will interrogate the ways in which narrative can question this dualistic set-up via characters with recognizably nonhuman features. Again, I will use Goatly's ecolinguistics as a template to

examine five narrative strategies that de-anthropomorphize character while revealing the constitutive interdependency of human subjects and nonhuman objects. Clearly, this inventory of strategies is not exhaustive, and there are many overlaps among the formal devices I will discuss. Further, a theory along these lines will not work for all narratives, and certainly not for the many narratives that – more or less deliberately – take on board anthropocentric ideas. It is a theory attuned to a particular corpus of stories that unsettle the human subject, such as we find in the contemporary genres that fall under Adam Trexler's (2015) heading of "Anthropocene fiction" – from realistic "climate fiction," such as Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* (2012), to dystopian and science-fiction novels such as Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003). The advantage of such a theory is that it shows how the destabilization of the human is not just a matter of theme but is inscribed, by some of these narratives at least, into the very formal logic of story. Obviously, the notion of character – bound up as it is with human subjectivity – is key to this destabilization.

2 Structuralist precedents?

Greimas's actantial model of narrative builds on, and extends, the parallel drawn by Propp between the workings of story and the syntactic organization of natural language. In an essay originally published in French in 1973, Greimas (1976: 106) distinguishes between actants and actors, the former being an abstract function comparable to subject and object in grammar, the latter being the instantiation of those roles in what we would informally call the characters of a narrative. Greimas envisages two possible "elementary schemata" of actantial organization: subject → object, and sender → object → receiver (1976: 108; see Figure 1). In the first, a subject acts upon an object, whereas in the second a subject (the sender) *transmits* an object to the receiver. These roles are instantiated in countless ways by narrative: for instance, the object transmitted in the second schema may be something material (a sword, a letter, an inheritance) or something intangible (knowledge, a tale).
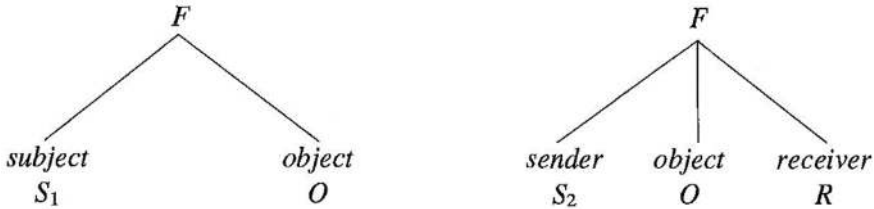
Figure 1: The two actantial schemata of narrative, according to Greimas (1976, 108).

At first glance, Greimas's schemata seem successful in uncoupling the actant from the human. It is no coincidence that Bruno Latour's actor-network theory – an influential precedent for the nonhuman turn – lifts the term from Greimas: as Latour acknowledges, actor-network theory "uses the technical word actant that comes from the study of literature" (2005: 54). In broad strokes, actor-network theory argues for the role played by technology as well as socio-cultural structures in producing what we normally think of as human "agency" – which in fact arises from complex human-nonhuman interactions. Latour refers to these nonhuman entities as "actants." Greimas anticipates this view, in the domain of narrative theory, by suggesting that a material object or an abstract entity such as capitalism can be actants in narrative, just like human characters. Human subjectivity and identity are here relegated to a matter of "discourse" – a surface manifestation that does not reach into the deep actantial level of formal relations.

Yet, even as it evacuates the human subject, Greimas's model does not go very far in exorcising the specter of anthropocentrism. The reasons for this are twofold. The first is more obvious, and has to do with the problematic claim to scientific objectivity of structuralist models. In evacuating the subject from narrative's deep structures, Greimas effaces his own subjectivity: he construes narrative as an object "out there," instead of taking into account the deep entanglement between storytelling and human experience, which has been emphasized by more recent, mind-oriented models of narrative (Herman 2013; Caracciolo 2014). The subject-object divide is thus built into Greimas's analytical method – a problematic assumption when viewed from the perspective of an econarratological theory of character. Secondly, and more importantly for my purposes here, in drawing an analogy between narrative and sentence structure Greimas implicitly treats as a universal of syntax a particular kind of sentence – namely, the transitive sentence: both his actantial schemata are predicated on the possibility of distinguishing between a grammatical subject (or sender in the second schema) and a grammatical object (what is being acted upon, or what is being transmitted in the second schema). This is a transitive organization, and it is deeply bound up

with a dualistic worldview. Work in the field of ecolinguistics will help me unpack this idea in the next section.

2.1 Beyond transitivity

The point of departure of Goatly's (1996) influential article on "Green Grammar and Grammatical Metaphor" is that transitive sentences tend to cast the agent into the position of a grammatical subject impinging on a grammatical object that is both inert and passive. Kristin Davidse and Sara Geyskens put this point more formally, taking the sentence "He spread the bread" as an example: "The causal model encoded by transitive [sentences] is one of *directedness* ..., in which an Actor directs action onto a Goal. We have a *unilateral* model of causality here in the sense that all the energy involved in the causal event comes from the Actor, viz. the bread butterer. The Goal, *the bread,* undergoes this causal event in a fully passive, inert manner" (1998: 158). Goatly's intuition is that it doesn't matter if the grammatical subject is semantically a human, or a nonhuman animal, or a material object, or an abstract concept: the dualistic notion of agency as mastery is deeply implicated in sentence structure. Syntax is thus bound up with the view that passive matter can be shaped and exploited at the subject's will. This does not mean that such view is entirely *created* by linguistic structure, as a strong version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis would have it. Goatly's article only traces a correlation between language and culture, where language does not necessarily determine the subject-object divide but plays a central role in reinforcing it; as Goatly explains, paraphrasing the title of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's (1980) well-known book on conceptual metaphor, "transitive effective structures are conventionalized grammatical metaphors, metaphors we die by, language which perpetuates the myth of power" (1996: 558).

Instead, Goatly's suggestion is that, in order to dispel this myth, "our image of the world has to become one in which processes predominate and human Actors disappear" (1996: 554). An example of a linguistic system that appears to implement this worldview is Blackfoot, an Algonquian language spoken by Native American tribes living in the northwestern U.S. and Canada: "a native speaker of Blackfoot ... can speak all day long without uttering a single noun – and ... this is the exception rather than the rule" (from an Internet post quoted in Goatly 2011: 80). The processual view of reality that emerges from Blackfoot is, for Goatly, "in step with recent, scientific, post-relativity models of the physical and biological universe" (2001: 231), including – arguably – the notion of metaphysical parity between humans and nonhuman realities.

To return to Greimas, the main problem with his structuralist theory of actants is that it reproduces – unwittingly – the dualistic power structure implicit in transitive sentences, with all that it entails ideologically. Put otherwise, a theory of character that is attuned to the causal efficacy of the material world will never get off the ground if we take syntactic transitivity as a starting point. What alternatives are available in the linguistic system, and how do they lay the groundwork for a new understanding of character qua actant? Goatly points out that, even if English is biased towards transitivity, it does not lack grammatical resources to question the separation between subject and object, and by extension human agency and the material world. These are the five grammatical tools discussed by Goatly (1996: 547–554):

1. The so-called "ergative system," which is a sentence structure different from the transitive system in that the grammatical object *participates* in the action initiated by the subject. In Davidse and Geyskens's words: "the causal model encoded by ergative [sentences] is not one of directing action onto a goal, but one of *instigating* a process involving the second participant" (1998: 158–159). Examples are "John opened the door," or – perhaps even more clearly – "John walked the dog."

2. The use of words like "it" and "there" in sentences like "it rains" and "there has been an accident on the highway." As Goatly puts it: "This structure makes it possible to state a proposition involving a process [such as rainfall or the accident, in my examples], without mentioning the participant ... involved. ... The use of relational processes instead of material ones is a gesture towards de-humanization of world view" (1996: 549).

3. Reciprocal verbs, which foreground interaction and therefore the bi-directionality of a causal process: for instance, "John and Mary met."

4. The promotion of a place or environment to the position of grammatical subject, in sentences such as "the bed was crawling with ants" (instead of "ants were crawling all over the bed").

5. Nominalization, which turns a verb into a grammatical noun (for instance, "the condensation of water" for "the water condenses"). Nominalizations extrapolate from the agent responsible for a given action; thus, they can be used to call attention to the processual nature of reality, as languages like Blackfoot can be said to do.

Goatly hastens to add that none of these grammatical devices is, in and of itself, sufficient to undermine dualism and anthropocentric assumptions; but they at least point to a use of language that is more aligned with what both science and contemporary philosophy tell us about the deep imbrication of human and non-human realities. The next section of this article explores, in a speculative vein,

how these grammatical devices may serve as building blocks for an econarratological account of character. Unlike Greimas, I am not interested in an all-encompassing theory of narrative but in more localized strategies through which particular stories may deploy characters that resist notions of human mastery and exceptionalism. I will thus survey the syntactic structures identified by Goatly and suggest possible narrative-level equivalents, explaining how they broaden our understanding of character as actant. I will focus on fictional narratives in the generic tradition of the novel, but similar devices may be used in other discourse genres, such as oral storytelling or news reports.

3 The ergative system

In the ergative system, as we have seen, agency is a matter not of direct causation but of "instigation," and extends from the grammatical subject to the grammatical object, involving both. In the sentence "John walked the dog," for instance, John initiates the action, but he and the dog co-participate in it. Something similar happens in the plot of *The Echo Maker* (2006), a novel by Richard Powers. At the forefront of the novel is the human drama of a car accident and its aftermath. The victim, a character named Mark, suffers brain damage and develops a psychiatric condition known as "Capgras syndrome": he views his sister, Karin, as an impostor, a lookalike of his real sister. The backdrop to these events is the Platte river in Nebraska, where thousands of sandhill cranes congregate every year, on their way from Central America to Canada and Alaska. In parallel with Mark's slow and uneasy recovery is the attempt, on the part of a group of corporate investors, to build a tourist resort on the banks of the river, which would seriously endanger the cranes. This subplot follows a standard transitive pattern, which places the human in an agentive position, and the nonhuman world (meaning both the river and the cranes) in the position of a disempowered object.

However, Mark's mysterious mental condition complicates and to some extent subverts this pattern. Not only are the cranes physically present when Mark's car skids out of control, but their fate seems intimately bound up with Mark's. In his delusion, he is convinced that the surgeons implanted a bird's brain into his skull during the operation that followed his accident. In this way, the cranes are symbolically implicated in the destabilization of the character's subjectivity, which points to a more general instability of the human subject. Powers's narrative reinforces this effect by portraying the birds not as individualized agents but as a collective actant, endowed with a group mentality that conflicts with the presumed autonomy and singularity of human selfhood: "Then thousands of them lift up in flood. The beating surface of the world rises, a spiral calling

upward on invisible thermals. Sounds carry them all the way skyward, clacks and wooden rattles, rolling, booming, bugling, clouds of living sound. Slowly, the mass unfurls in ribbons and disperses into thin blue" (2006: 429). Powers's metaphorical language blurs the dividing line between the cranes' coordinated behavior and the surrounding landscape, transforming them into a "flood," "a beating surface," or "clouds" that eventually merge with the "thin blue" of the sky. This image of the cranes as a collective actant affects the human characters as well; for instance, it defamiliarizes Karin's view of humanity, in a key passage in which she realizes that "the whole [human] race suffered from Capgras. Those birds danced like our next of kin, looked like our next of kin, called and willed and parented and taught and navigated all just like our blood relations. Half their parts were still ours. Yet humans waved them off: impostors" (2006: 347–348).

The cranes are thus a full-fledged actant in Powers's novel insofar as they co-participate in Mark's accident and determine its narrative and ethical stakes. Crucially, this does not happen by way of direct causation, but through the symbolic instigation of Mark's condition: "the cranes crashed Mark's car," would be the closest sentence-length equivalent of the plot. Through this ergative structure, with the cranes as a nonhuman actant, the novel is able to locate the human within a longer, evolutionary history that undermines any separation between human agency and an allegedly inert natural world.

3.1 Filler "there" and "it"

Goatly's second device is the use of filler words like "there" or "it" in existential statements, or to denote atmospheric phenomena. Because these words fulfill a purely grammatical function, their semantic emptiness draws attention to the processual nature of the scenario that is being verbally conveyed: in a sentence like "it is cold today," the "it" is not an agent or subject, but only stands in for meteorological conditions defined by a certain perceived temperature. In narrative terms, this device is reminiscent of what Ann Banfield (1987) calls "empty center texts": descriptive passages in which the subject position is left vacant, and a scene is verbally recorded despite the absence of any observers. The deictic center of this scene – the location that would normally be occupied by an experiencing subject – remains empty. Banfield takes as an example the interludes of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (2011 [1931]), which portray a sea landscape at different times of the day, without any character being present on the scene. For Monika Fludernik, these passages contain subtle hints of subjectivity that encourage the reader to mentally *project* into the empty deictic center: "Just as, in figural narrative, the reader is invited to see the fictional world through the eyes

of a reflector character, in the present text the reader also reads through a text-internal consciousness, but since no character is available to whom one could attribute such consciousness, the reader directly identifies with a story-internal position" (1996: 150).

But a reading strategy more in line with econarratological interests would be to halt or at least suspend this readerly projection, viewing the emptiness of these scenarios as a window onto a world untouched by human presence. This is something that Woolf herself strongly cues in the famous "Time Passes" section of *To the Lighthouse* (2000 [1927]), which registers material changes in a house during a ten-year period in which it is left uninhabited. Greg Garrard (2012) discusses Woolf's "Time Passes" as an instance of what he calls "disanthropy," a vision of the world without humans. Yet, for Garrard, attempts at disanthropy in verbal narrative are bound to fail: "The helpless allegiance of written genres to narrative voice and anthropomorphic characterization makes disanthropic literature conspicuously self-contradictory, and probably impossible" (2012: 43). Instead, Garrard turns to cinema as a medium that, due to the "ostensible impersonality of the camera" (2012: 43), is uniquely equipped to represent human absence. Garrard does not discuss Banfield's concept, and downplays the power of literary language to break the "helpless allegiance" to "anthropomorphic characterization." In fact, empty deictic center passages like Woolf's capitalize on what Garrard calls their "self-contradictory" nature, inviting readers to undergo and value an experience of absence that exposes the rich vitality of the world without humans.

Jim Crace's novel *Being Dead* (1999) is a powerful example of how empty center descriptions can probe nonhuman materiality. The novel narrates the events that led to a couple's murder on a deserted beach. What takes center stage in the narrative – rather morbidly – is the material history of the two dead bodies, whose decomposition is described in painstaking detail even if there is no full-fledged character on the scene. Consider, for instance, this passage: "But the rain, the wind, the shooting stars, the maggots and the shame had not succeeded yet in blowing them away or bringing to an end their days of grace. There'd been no thunderclap so far. His hand was touching her. The flesh on flesh. The fingertip across the tendon strings. He still held on. She still was held" (1999: 102). The description features the equivalent of an "it" or an existential "there" where we would expect a human-like observer: it foregrounds process and the slow but inevitable decomposition of the bodies on the beach, conveying a cosmic and not entirely unironic perspective on the two characters' death. The absence of human spectators is made so salient by the narrative that it becomes an anomalous, ghostly (and ghastly) actant – a reminder of the nonhuman processes that enfold the human and constitute its ultimate fate.

3.2 Reciprocal verbs

Reciprocal verbs place two subjects in an agentive role, stressing the reciprocity of an action without establishing a subject-object (and therefore inherently hierarchical) relation: "John and Mary fought" is dramatically different from the transitive construction "John beat Mary." A degree of reciprocity is present in all narratives that probe the interrelation between human and nonhuman realities. However, from the perspective I am exploring in this article, the interrelation should not only be the thematic upshot of a narrative, but should be inscribed into its progression, with nonhuman events and elements becoming actants. Narratives focusing on catastrophe are a particularly salient example of reciprocity at this level: a catastrophe is something that intervenes in human history and discloses, in Kate Rigby's words, "the entanglement – material, but potentially also moral – of human and nonhuman actors and factors in the etiology, unfolding, and aftermath of catastrophes that turn out to straddle the dubious nature-culture divide" (2013: 214).

We find many instances of catastrophic reciprocity in the popular genre of postapocalyptic fiction. In Colson Whitehead's novel *Zone One* (2011), for example, the zombies (here known as "skels") are a collective nonhuman actant, which the narrator explicitly compares to the effects of anthropogenic climate change: "The ocean [of the skels] had overtaken the streets, as if the news programs' global warming simulations had finally come to pass and the computer-generated swells mounted to drown the great metropolis" (2011: 302). Whitehead's figurative language establishes an intricate network of reciprocity: the skels are first compared to a nonhuman location, the ocean, while their invasion of the metropolis is assimilated to global warming (a phenomenon fueled by human activity), which in turn is seen through the lens of human technology (a computer simulation). Even as the skels are a fully nonhuman actant in the novel, the simile works towards a redistribution of agency across the human-nonhuman divide.

The plot of *Zone One* magnifies this sense of reciprocal entanglement by shuttling back and forth between two time frames: the protagonist's childhood, before the virus outbreak that led to the zombie apocalypse, and the current, postapocalyptic scenario in which the skels are about to break into the defensive wall that was erected in lower Manhattan. These frequent, and mostly unannounced, flashbacks frustrate the reader's attempts to establish a linear chronology, mirroring the disorientation experienced by the protagonist himself – what the novel refers to, ironically, as his "postapocalyptic stress disorder" (2011: 69). The trauma of the zombie invasion, and the subsequent collapse of organized society, threaten to turn humans into zombie-like creatures devoid of a coherent sense of self (more on this in Caracciolo 2018a). At the same time, Whitehead's

original contribution to the zombie genre is the invention of so-called "straggler" skels, who (unlike regular skels) are condemned to re-enact a gesture or haunt a location that meant something to them in their pre-skel life – a clear manifestation of the psychological cycles of trauma. An inkling of the skels' humanity is thus poignantly preserved. The figure of the straggler, along with the psychologically motivated narrative structure of the novel, steer clear of a sharp dichotomization between skels and humans and instead stress their reciprocal relation.

3.3 Promotion of a place to subject

Goatly's promotion of place to grammatical subject has a straightforward narrative equivalent: stylistic and narrative strategies can push the space of the setting, which typically serves as a mere backdrop to human characters and events, towards an agentive position. For instance, in an insightful ecostylistic reading of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004), Elisabetta Zurru (2017) argues that the landscape of the Sundarbans on the Bay of Bengal is one of the main actants in Ghosh's novel, entering a reciprocal relationship with the *human* characters. Zurru's analysis shows that "the linguistic level turns 'the setting of the novel' into an active, major character in the story" (2017: 203–204) through, in particular, the personification of the river Matla, in sentences such as "the Matla laughed its mental laugh" or "the Matla took pity" on someone (quoted in Zurru 2017: 230).

   An even more striking example of promotion of place to narrative actant is Area X in Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach trilogy (VanderMeer 2014a, 2014b, 2014c). Area X is a coastal region in North America where the ecosystem shows some serious, and inexplicable, anomalies. The U.S. government dispatches a series of research teams to investigate, but these expeditions repeatedly (and dramatically) fail, suggesting that the anomalies run deeper than previously thought: the government's official version points to an environmental catastrophe, but there are strong indications that Area X was occupied by an alien life form that has radically altered the landscape. Just like the Sundarbans in Ghosh's novel, Area X becomes an actant, but in a way that avoids direct personification, instead emphasizing Area X's nonhuman opacity and unreadability: "nothing about language, about communication, could bridge the divide between human beings and Area X" (VanderMeer 2014c: 311). When, in the course of the trilogy, Area X starts expanding and incorporating the rest of the world, there is little doubt that its behavior displays intentionality, but its exact motivations remain unclear and deeply perplexing; as one of the main characters reflects, she "felt that if she could make Area X react, then she would somehow throw it off course. Even though we didn't know what course it was on" (2014b: 262).

Ultimately, however, the physical expansion of Area X proves less unsettling than its capacity to shape and control the minds of those who come into contact with it. Consider the following passage: "That landscape was impinging on them now. The temperature dipped and rose violently. There were rumblings deep underground that manifested as slight tremors. The sun came to them with a 'greenish tinge' as if 'somehow the border were distorting our vision'" (2014a: 164). The idea is not just that the trilogy's spatial setting informs the characters' existential and material situation – which would be a simple inversion of the transitive subject-object structure – but that it becomes deeply implicated in their actions and psychological states. Through the actantial mediation of place, the nonhuman infiltrates both the storyworld and the characters' psychology. This process culminates in the third volume of the trilogy, in which several chapters are focalized by Ghost Bird, an anthropomorphic emanation of Area X: far from being straightforwardly personified, the landscape of Area X thus ends up taking over and nonhumanizing the human.

3.4 Nominalization

Nominalization uses a noun to capture a process normally denoted by a verb, thus eliding the agents involved in that process. This is, fundamentally, an operation of linguistic abstraction, in two ways: the noun abstracts from a specific event ("the evaporation of water" is more general than "the water evaporates"), and the noun abstracts from the participants in that event (i.e., who or what caused the water to evaporate). How does this translate into narrative terms? A possible equivalent are narratives that foreground an abstract nonhuman process, which displaces human intentionality as the driving force of the plot. In Marie-Laure Ryan's (1991) seminal account, plot is both triggered by and determined in its progression by the beliefs and desires of human (or human-like) characters. But in a novel like Kurt Vonnegut's *Galápagos* (2011 [1985]), the narrative progression appears to be governed by a long series of coincidences and unlikely outcomes: if humanity survives a catastrophic virus outbreak, it is not due to the survivors' efforts but thanks to the unintended, and surprising, consequences of their actions. In this way, the logic of the plot mirrors the haphazard, chance-driven logic of natural evolution (a major player in the novel), as I have argued in more detail elsewhere (Caracciolo 2018c). Evolution thus becomes an abstract, nonhuman actant undermining expectations of human mastery over the course of the narrative.

Another example of this strategy is Jeanette Winterson's novel *The Stone Gods* (2009 [2007]), which adopts an abstract pattern – the loop – as a formal template

for the plot. The novel suggests that every civilization is bound to cause its own demise through the mindless exploitation of natural resources; the next civilization will have to start from scratch, in a loop of Nietzschean eternal recurrence. Halfway through the novel (Winterson 2009: 54–55), this idea is allegorized by the parable-like narrative of a character who commits suicide, then is given another chance by an angel, if only to commit suicide again, countless times. At another level, the novel traces a strange loop by way of metalepsis, when a copy of *The Stone Gods* makes a surprise appearance in the storyworld: "'What's that?' Spike asked. 'It's what I told you about, today, yesterday, when, I don't know when, it seems a lifetime ago. *The Stone Gods*.' 'I wonder who left it there?' 'It was me.' 'Why, Billie?' A message in a bottle. A signal. But then I saw it was still there … round and round on the Circle Line. A repeating world" (2009: 203; ellipsis in the original). This insistently thematized loop thus becomes a spatial model for the logic of the narrative, uncoupling – like evolution in Vonnegut's novel – the progression of the story from any sense of overarching human intentionality. Both *Galápagos* and *The Stone Gods* thus offer narrative equivalents of nominalization as Goatly discusses it: abstract concepts (respectively, natural evolution and loop-like recurrence) are transformed into actants, determining the characters' fate and putting the nonhuman in control of the narrative.

4 Conclusion

This article revisited Greimas's notion of "actant" from a perspective informed by the nonhuman turn and contemporary discussions on the Anthropocene. The structuralist approach to character, which Greimas systematized in his work, aimed to extricate character in narrative from a purely mimetic understanding. Thus, Greimas's actantial model promises to de-anthropomorphize the concept of character and speaks to contemporary philosophical work that questions the metaphysical separation between human and nonhuman realities (as demonstrated by Latour's adoption of the term "actant" in his actor-network theory). However, from the perspective of what Erin James (2015) calls an "econarratology," Greimas's operation falls short: his structuralist model rests on a syntactic system – transitivity – that is fundamentally dualistic and closely bound up with anthropocentric assumptions. To overcome this limitation, we need to think more carefully about linguistic devices that serve as sites of resistance to an anthropocentric ideology and can potentially expose the co-constitution of human subjectivity and nonhuman realities. Goatly's work in the field of ecolinguistics offers helpful suggestions as to where to find these devices in the linguistic system. In this article, I have attempted to scale up these devices to the level of whole

narratives, tracing them in a corpus of contemporary novels that explicitly address the Anthropocenic interrelation of humans and nonhuman processes. This focus on contemporary fiction was determined pragmatically, but the five strategies I have discussed are likely to be found in both nonfictional narrative genres (e.g., conversational storytelling) and in fiction that predates the concept of Anthropocene and the current ecological crisis. Further research is needed to illuminate historical differences in the use of these strategies, as well as differences across the fiction-nonfiction divide.

On a purely conceptual level, it is important to point out that my approach to character is anything but the systematic theory of narrative that Greimas sought to develop. But systematicity was not my goal in this article. Opening up the notion of character to nonhuman actants is, necessarily, an explorative and speculative project that strives to read between the lines of narrative's anthropocentric dominant – its bias towards the human scale. Conceptualizing actants in this way requires expanding our understanding of causality (see Caracciolo 2018b): the modes of causality involved by nonhuman realities are, clearly, alternative to the psychological causation of human characters' beliefs and intentions – the traditional stuff of storytelling. The thrust of the econarratological theory of character I have started to outline in this article is that narrative, and particularly fictional narrative, has the capacity to probe modes of causal efficacy that are alternative to human agency and subjectivity.

It may be objected that there is a degree of metaphorical slippage in my overhaul of the concept of actant: we have seen that tides and cranes and even abstract scientific models can become actants in narrative; isn't this "just" a metaphor? The challenge of developing a theory of narrative geared towards nonhuman realities lies precisely in learning to move beyond dichotomies of this kind, including dichotomies between the literal and the metaphorical use of concepts. Undoubtedly, attributing intentionality to nonhuman realities involves a metaphorical leap, because a powerful combination of cognitive predispositions and cultural factors (especially in a Western context) leads us to regard these realities as inert and passive. As Edward Slingerland puts it: "The dualism advocated by Plato and Descartes was not a historical or philosophical accident, but rather a development of an intuition that comes naturally to us, as bearers of theory of mind: agents are different from things. Agents actively think, choose, and move themselves; things can only be passively moved" (2008: 394). Yet the metaphorical extension of human-scale concepts such as agency and intentionality has great heuristic value, in that it can reveal the ways in which nonhuman realities *resist* anthropomorphic (and metaphorical) appropriation. Metaphors, and particularly the creative metaphors that are deployed by literary narrative, thus participate in a process of discovery of human-nonhuman entanglements

(see Caracciolo et al. under review). If we dismiss the notion of nonhuman actant as a "mere" metaphor, we have already closed the door on that possibility of discovery.

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