Planetary Los Angeles: Climate Realism and Transnational Narrative in Amitav Ghosh’s Gun Island (2019)

Edwin Gilson

School of Literature and Languages, University of Surrey, Guildford, UK

ABSTRACT

This essay argues that the fire-plagued Los Angeles of Amitav Ghosh’s 2019 novel Gun Island functions as a device to illuminate the planetary processes and continuities of climate change and the Anthropocene. I demonstrate the ways in which Ghosh makes metaphorical connections between the disparate settings of his novel – particularly L.A and the Sundarbans delta in the Bay of Bengal – to portray the Earth as a single living organism defined by environmental, ecological and social flux. As a consequence of this transnational narrative, Los Angeles becomes a symptom of planetary malaise rather than a distinct, bounded space. Analysing Gun Island primarily through the framework of Lynn Badia, Marija Cetinic and Jeff Diamanti’s conception of ‘climate realism’ – with reference also to Amy Elias and Christian Moraru’s ‘planetarity’ and Ursula Heise’s ‘sense of planet’ – I explain how the novel exhibits a contemporary realist form that rejects provincial thinking and advocates a planetary consciousness. Moreover, I contend that Gun Island departs from the long lineage of Los Angeles disaster literature, suggesting that Ghosh’s L.A does not expose national anxieties – as has often been the case in such fiction – but rather a planetary condition.

In December 2017, the ‘Skirball Fire’ burned 422 acres of Los Angeles land and forced historic institutions such as the Getty Center and UCLA to temporarily close their doors. This was a relatively minor blaze by recent California standards, but it is notable for another reason. Six months before it broke out, Indian author Amitav Ghosh had written a scene in his novel Gun Island (2019) in which a fire creeps towards a famous L.A museum – a fictionalised Getty Center – forcing an evacuation of the building. In promotional interviews for the release of Gun Island, Ghosh repeatedly referenced this strange coincidence:

To see things you’ve seen in your own mind sort of playing out in real life – it’s just so disturbing you know? […] But that is the world that we are in. The world of fact is outrunning the world of fiction (NPR, 2019).

Such blazes have long been a feature of Los Angeles life, of course, and the Getty Center has been in the line of fire before. Ghosh’s assessment, however, does raise timely...
questions about the relationship between reality and representation in the Anthropocene – the proposed name for our current geologic epoch, defined by the transformative human imprint upon the Earth and its spiralling repercussions, including climate change. California recorded its largest ever wildfire season in 2020, for instance, and five of its ten biggest ever blazes (LA Times, 2021). If the events of the real world are outpacing the literary imagination, as Ghosh suggests, how should writers of fiction react?

In his own response to this complex question, Ghosh has expressed his conviction that stories about climate change ‘cannot be local’ (New York Magazine, 2019). This planetary process demands a planetary narrative in reply, Ghosh inferred, and Gun Island is an unmistakably global novel. The author draws many symbolic parallels between his disparate settings – the Sundarbans delta in the Bay of Bengal, Los Angeles and Venice – to highlight the connections between such seemingly remote places in the Anthropocene. More obviously, protagonist Deen Datta, an antiquarian book dealer based in Brooklyn, clocks up considerable air miles as he hops continents throughout the novel, encountering stark evidence of the climate crisis at every turn. Deen is witness to rapid coastal erosion and cyclone damage in the Sundarbans, towering wildfires in Los Angeles, flash-flooding in Venice, and finally a gargantuan tornado in the Venetian Lagoon. Climate change is thus the underlying constant that enables Ghosh’s ‘stitching together [of] different geographies – and histories – around the world’ (Sinha 2019).

This essay scrutinises Ghosh’s transnational narrative, and specifically the way in which his fire-plagued Los Angeles acts as a vehicle for a broader engagement with the global realities of climate change. It argues that Ghosh employs L.A as a device not to localise the planetary scale of the crisis, as may initially seem the case, but quite the opposite: to underline that scale, illuminating the atmospheric and ecological continuities of the Anthropocene and ultimately advocating a planetary consciousness (in his characters and readers). Place functions as a portal to the planetary in Gun Island, as Ghosh endeavours to convey Earth-wide environmental flux through his localised spatial descriptions. Los Angeles in particular becomes a symptom of an escalating global malaise rather than a rounded, well-defined setting in its own right. In its ambition to render a contemporary reality, the novel can be interpreted through the filter of Lynn Badia, Marija Cetinic and Jeff Diamanti’s ‘climate realism’. This is a proposed ‘research agenda’ that seeks to ‘grapple with the endless implications of climate change, ecological complexity, and planetary instability for thought […] ontology and aesthetics’ (2020, my emphasis). As I will argue, Gun Island’s plot, characters and – most relevant to this essay – settings should be understood as products of a realist mode that prioritises planet over place, and foregrounds the transnational tumult referred to by Badia, Cetinic and Diamanti. The analytic framework of ‘climate realism’ therefore demystifies the rather unorthodox literary form of Ghosh’s novel, which entails ancient mythology and freak coincidences in addition to the aforementioned global travel. In its vast spatial scope and intellectual openness to the manifold ramifications of the climate crisis, Gun Island extols the individual and collective benefits of thinking beyond the regional or national, and towards planetary awareness. By extension, it stresses the importance of a transnational ethical and political mindset in any coordinated attempt at mitigating the crisis and the global injustices it is exacerbating.
Despite the novel’s overwhelming focus on the planetary, its smoke-shrouded L.A also – perhaps unknowingly – channels historic regional anxieties. ‘The city burning is Los Angeles’s deepest image of itself’, Joan Didion famously claimed in her 1968 essay collection *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. ‘Los Angeles is the weather of catastrophe, of apocalypse’ (2017, 201). In consigning L.A so thoroughly to the flames in *Gun Island*, Ghosh perpetuates this apocalyptic regional imaginary and participates in the time-honoured cultural tradition of the ‘literary destruction of Los Angeles’ as Mike Davis termed it in *Ecology of Fear* (1998). In Davis’s analysis, the wealth of disaster fiction set in L.A throughout the 20th century reveals an array of repressed ‘national discontents’ and ‘deep-rooted cultural predispositions’ (354). If such catastrophic regional fiction has often exposed national insecurities, then, Ghosh scales up L.A’s historic symbolic status to illustrate a planetary condition. While *Gun Island* follows the legacy of the 20th century L.A disaster novel in one sense, it is more notable for the ways in which it departs from it. On a superficial level its unrelenting firescape recalls the devastation witnessed in much of the city’s fictional representation, but Ghosh sets his sights beyond a critique of the region or nation, aiming instead for a state-of-the-planet address.

*Gun Island*’s portrayal of L.A might initially seem shallow and one-dimensional in a purely regional context. It does not even attempt to reflect the environmental and social complexity of such a sprawling city. It does, however, serve a clear formal and thematic purpose: to highlight the ways in which the local and the global have become inseparable in the Anthropocene, and to consider what it means to live in a world of unprecedented planetary continuities and globalised systems. This essay first examines the reasons behind Ghosh’s choice of L.A as a main setting, and the city’s specific role in the novel’s planetary narrative and ethic system. It then positions *Gun Island* within ecocritical and spatial contexts, explaining how Ghosh’s portrayal of L.A taps into regional literary tradition to engage with the ‘sense of planet’ discussed by Heise (2008, 56) and the notion of ‘planetarity’ coined by Elias and Moraru (2015, xii). Finally, it argues that the L.A of *Gun Island* is indicative of Ghosh’s brand of climate realism, which exposes the local-global interrelations of the Anthropocene and evokes the ‘planetary Los Angeles’ of this essay’s title.

**Place and Planet in Gun Island**

*Gun Island* is an expansive and sometimes exhausting novel that tackles globalisation, digital technology, mass migration, human trafficking and modern slavery as well as climate change. Ghosh weaves the 17th-century Bengali folk legend of the Bonduki Sadagar into his own narrative, comparing the ‘Little Ice Age’ of that century – a time of drastic global temperature change, famine and plague – to our own era of environmental crisis. Ghosh’s plot and the legend become increasingly entangled and uncannily alike as the novel progresses. As Deen learns more about the Bonduki Sadagar, he realises it is not merely a ‘wonder tale about fantastic places and people’, but rather a story rooted in the tumultuous global reality of the 17th-century (2019, 152). Despite the apparent improbability of the myth, in which a merchant embarks on a treacherous voyage to escape the wrath of the snake goddess Manasa Devi, the ‘outlines of the story are historically quite plausible’, as Deen’s historian friend Cinta asserts (155). The Bonduki
Sadagar, then, is deployed by Ghosh as an allegory for our current age of environmental turbulence.

In his influential non-fiction work *The Great Derangement*, which can be considered a theoretical prequel to *Gun Island*, Ghosh bemoaned the ‘failures’ of ‘serious’ literary realism to address climate change, part of the ‘broader and cultural failure that lies at the heart of the climate crisis’ (2016, 7, 8). A major reason for this perceived disengagement, Ghosh argued, is the problem of probability. The extreme weather events of the Anthropocene may seem implausible in a realist context – more the substance of genre fiction than literary fiction – but now ‘these events are neither surreal nor magical. To the contrary, these highly improbable occurrences are overwhelmingly, urgently, astounding real’ (Ghosh, TGD, 27). By the same logic, while the succession of climate disasters Deen experiences in *Gun Island* might appear fundamentally unrealistic, Ghosh has emphasised that he views the novel as a ‘book about reality. That’s really what it is. It’s a book about reality’ (*Chicago Review of Books*, 2019). His rather needless repetition in this interview quote suggests he is reinforcing his contention in *The Great Derangement* that literary realism must adjust its parameters and experiment with diverse techniques to represent our new Anthropocene normal.

In *Gun Island*, the author draws on methods such as ‘implausibility, coincidences and ancient myth’ to present ‘the reality of the inextricable connection between human actions and the global climate crisis’ (Mishra, Pancholi 2021, 8). More specifically, this connection is symbolised by the tension embedded within the Bonduki Sadagar story, between capitalism and the natural world. While ancient mythology does not seem compatible with a realist effort to mirror modern life, its inclusion in *Gun Island* enables Ghosh’s social critique. The author has explained that the Bonduki Sadagar gets to ‘the heart of what you might call a contemporary condition […] [the] conflict between the human desire for profit […] and nature or the environment’ (Ghosh 2019). These two colliding forces are embodied by the merchant and goddess respectively.

A Global North megacity like Los Angeles is, of course, infinitely more responsible for driving the climate crisis than a poor region like the Sundarbans (notwithstanding L.A’s deep socio-economic inequities). Indeed, Jenny Price has argued that L.A marks the ruinous endpoint of individual liberty and capitalist culture beyond all environmental constraint or consideration, the ‘American dream on a shooting rampage’ (2005, 234). In one sense, then, Ghosh’s L.A is metaphorically represented by the merchant of the parable, and the raging wildfires are signs of nature biting back: the retaliation of the Manasa Devi. As Price contends, the ‘horror and fallout’ of unchecked environmental degradation in the service of capital is immediately evident in L.A, not just in the form of fires but also dangerous pollution, water toxicity and other health hazards (237).

Beyond such localised environmental repercussions, though, *Gun Island* implies that any hope of global climate justice depends upon affluent Global North populations (and especially governments) adopting a planetary consciousness, and understanding how their carbon-rich lifestyles are disproportionately affecting Global South regions. A transnational perspective is required not just to comprehend the physical planetary processes of climate change, the novel insinuates, but also to identify and (theoretically) challenge the global injustices it has revealed. At the same time, Ghosh also suggests that storied Global North regions like L.A and Venice will have to adjust to the hardships hitherto experienced by poorer, more vulnerable nations. Having lived in India – where
he was born and raised – and the United States, Ghosh is well-placed to compare cultural attitudes to climate and environmental change. In an interview with DW, he said

I come from a part of the world where we didn’t have very rosy expectations of the world or the future. We knew there would be a lot of upheavals, and we witnessed these upheavals at first hand, so in that sense I think Westerners had a belief in stability and the promise of the future that I didn’t share (2019).

Los Angeles residents, accustomed to the perpetual anxiety of fires and the overdue gargantuan earthquake nicknamed ‘The Big One’, might object to the idea that they possess a presumption of environmental security. Nonetheless, Ghosh clearly aligns L.A (and Venice) with the Sundarbans to highlight how every place on Earth is now ‘at the mercy’ of human-modified planetary systems, albeit to drastically varying degrees (Gun Island, 253).

Gun Island also infers that climate change threatens to undercut or even undo the long-standing spatial identities of historic, world-renowned cities. As we will see, Deen’s expectations of grandeur and comfort from his visit to L.A are confounded by the walls of fire and smoke that engulf the city. The Global South and Global North residents of the novel approach the climate crisis very differently. While the beleaguered residents of the Sundarbans are resigned to the prospect of leaving their home due to climate devastation (95), the delegates at an academic conference Deen attends in Los Angeles try to navigate delicately around the fires eating up the surrounding hills. One of the biggest concessions made to the blazes is a rearrangement of the hotel dining room so that ‘guests would not have to gaze at waves of flame as they breakfasted’ (133).

This business-as-usual mindset is encapsulated by the venue director’s misguided rallying cry after the conference is relocated to a safer building: ‘We’ve got to show Mother Nature that we’re not quitters’ (138). As the director and delegates struggle to retain their agency in adverse circumstances, their defiance appears increasingly ill-judged and incompatible with external events. The cognitive dissonance between reality and reaction here reveals Ghosh’s implication that the assumed autonomy of rich Western regions will be undermined as the climate crisis accelerates. While Gun Island exposes the climate injustices making life ever more difficult for certain Global South populations, then, it also challenges the ‘rosy expectations of the world’ held by once comfortable Global North societies (Ghosh, DW, 2019).

As Deen encounters various extreme weather events throughout the novel, he comes to realise that ‘what appear to be separate catastrophes are really different expressions of increasingly versatile and extreme meteorological patterns’ (Kluwick, 2020, 75). Alarming incidents like the L.A wildfires can no longer be understood as purely regional in scope and relevance: they are indicators of a planetary system. In this regard Gun Island responds to one of Ghosh’s key arguments in The Great Derangement, concerning the ways in which the processes of the Anthropocene transcend regional borders and therefore challenge traditional literary notions of setting and place:

The earth of the Anthropocene is [...] a world of insistent, inescapable continuities animated by forces that are nothing if not inconceivably vast [...] no less than they mock the discontinuities and boundaries of the nation-state do these connections defy the boundedness of “place”, creating continuities of experience between Bengal and Louisiana, New York and Mumbai, Tibet and Alaska [...] those continuities and those inconceivably vast forces [...] have now become impossible to exclude, even from texts (61, 62).
Gun Island illuminates these transnational ‘continuities’, positioning the Earth as an interconnected, vulnerable biosphere. The novel therefore rejects provincialism in a social and ecological sense. It conforms to Nazia Hasan’s analysis that the environmental sensibility running through Ghosh’s oeuvre encourages us to ‘think about what it means to live with rather than simply on the Earth’ (2013, 193, emphasis in original). More directly, it urges a resistance against a geographically bounded outlook and the discriminatory attitudes that can accompany it, as exemplified by European xenophobes protesting the arrival of a migrant boat in the Venetian Lagoon (Gun Island, 299).

As a result of these authorial intentions, Gun Island exhibits and endorses an ‘emerging worldview’ in contemporary culture that Amy Elias and Christian Moraru name ‘planetarity’: a word to denote the image of ‘the planet as a living organism, as a shared ecology’ (2015, xii). Arising from the ever-growing public awareness of the ‘fragility of our common world ecosystems’ – put under increasing pressure by human activity – ‘planetarity’ proposes a shift away from the word ‘globe’ as shorthand for a ‘financial-technocratic system’ and instead promotes the concept of ‘worlding’: the perception of the planet as a ‘world ecology’ (17). Elias and Moraru stress the ‘ethical’ thrust of this philosophical perspective (xii). While planetarity arrives in the same ‘historical moment’ as globalisation, the former entails a sensitivity to human and nonhuman life that is often absent from definitions of the latter (xii).

This planetary ethic system characterises Gun Island. The novel’s overt political and environmental ideology opposes the kind of callous language used by Cinta, who, sipping prosecco in a luxurious airport lounge, remarks that her flight has been delayed because of ‘some flood somewhere’ (26). Ghosh ultimately closes the geographical and experiential divide between the Global North, represented by Cinta and Deen himself – who initially enjoys a comfortable life in New York – and impoverished Global South populations who are more likely to suffer from the meteorological disasters Cinta so casually refers to. Indeed Cinta’s words come back to haunt her, when, much later in the novel, she and Deen are stranded on a sinking jetty during a flash flood in Venice. The shocking incident makes Deen wonder: ‘How was it possible that in this most civilized of cities we should be so utterly alone and helpless, so completely at the mercy of the Earth?’ (252, 253). In the ‘shared ecology’ of the human-altered Earth, Ghosh implies, the cultural connotations of famous Global North regions will not protect them from climate catastrophe (Elias and Moraru, xii).

As a method to highlight climate injustice while also collapsing the gap between Global North and Global South, Ghosh’s plot unfolds on two concurrent levels. While Deen and Cinta embark on a cross-continenal journey of discovery concerning the historical context of the Bonduki Sadagar, Deen’s two young Bengali friends Tipu and Rafi undertake an arduous migration voyage from the imperilled Sundarbans to the Venetian Lagoon. Their expedition increasingly resembles that of the benighted merchant of the Bonduki Sadagar tale, and is enabled by the mapping facilities of the internet: ‘the migrant’s magic carpet’, as Tipu calls it (61). Young Bengalis are being forced out of their homeland by environmental disaster and lured to Europe by enticing images on social media, such as their migrant friends ‘sipping caramel lattes’ in Berlin (61). The novel’s focus on the push and pull factors of climate migration – albeit with a greater emphasis on the former – demonstrates how the overarching patterns of climate change
and globalisation are blurring regional borders, and rendering human societies more connected than ever before.

In its earnest exploration of this contemporary reality, *Gun Island* responds to perhaps the most influential and enduring ecocritical call for a planetary consciousness: Ursula Heise’s *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Heise 2008). In Heise’s view, the ‘rapidly increasing connections around the globe’ in the 21st century – both technological and ecological – demand a turn towards the planetary in environmental fiction and thought (56). A ‘sense of planet’ is required rather than a mere ‘sense of place’, or at least an acknowledgement of the local-global interrelation: ‘The challenge for environmental thinking […] is to shift the core of its cultural imagination from a sense of place to a less territorial and more systemic sense of planet’ (56). The increasingly prominent position of climate change in public discourse has exposed the connection between the domestic and the planetary, as awareness grows about the link between innocuous everyday activities and dangerous global heating. As such, in Antonia Mehnert’s summary, ‘Thinking about global climate change not only means considering what effect one’s own lifestyle choices will have on distant places, but also imagining the ways in which global transformations will alter one’s own local environment’ (2016, 55).

The challenge for writers of fiction that arises from such knowledge is how to bridge the gap between place and planet in a persuasive and coherent narrative. Heise writes that the ‘environmental imagination of the global’ in contemporary fiction has been expressed ‘through the detailed exploration of a local site that on close inspection turns out to be linked to the global in unanticipated, and sometimes unsettling, and sometimes exhilarating ways’ (210). As we have seen, Ghosh has insisted that stories about climate change ‘cannot be local’, but he does not dismiss the role of locality entirely in *Gun Island*. He does overtly prioritise planet over place, however, emphasising atmospheric and ecologic but also technologic and socio-geographic processes that transcend regional borders. The ‘sense of planet’ conjured in *Gun Island* encompasses globalisation as well as transnational environmental flux (Heise, 56).

Indeed, it is not just climate change that crosses boundaries in the novel but also the ubiquity of the internet and social media, demographic change (in Venice particularly), and mass human and nonhuman movement. Alongside the epic migration journey of Tipu and Rafi, non-native animal species constantly materialise in unexpected places, upending regional knowledge systems, including the appearance of a poisonous alien snake species at Venice Beach, Los Angeles (a significant incident to which I will return later in this essay). At one stage, after finding a foreign breed of spider on the lid of his laptop in Venice, Deen muses: ‘It was as if the very rotation of the planet had accelerated, moving all living things at unstoppable velocities’ (181). This line is Ghosh’s most concise and direct encapsulation of the themes underpinning his novel.

If place and planet are deeply interwoven in *Gun Island*, then, so are past and present. One of the novel’s major messages is that we must look to history to gain a better understanding of our contemporary moment, and uncertain future. A final rumination by Deen on the last page of the novel makes this point very explicitly: ‘The possibility of our deliverance lies not in the future but in the past’ (312). At the academic conference in L.A, hosted at Ghosh’s fictionalised Getty Center, the ‘trendy young historian’ (135) giving a keynote lecture stresses the connections between the
17th and 21st centuries, before gesturing towards the looming wildfires outside the museum and concluding:

What we are seeing [here] [. . .] should be enough to remind us that the climatic perturbations of the Little Ice Age were trivial compared to what is in store for us now. What our ancestors experienced is but a pale foreshadowing of what the future holds! (137, 138)

This rousing climax to the keynote is a rather convenient way of navigating around one of the potential contradictions of Gun Island. If today’s environmental situation is so uniquely worrying, isn’t that verdict somewhat undermined by the fact there was a not dissimilar state of catastrophe just 400 years ago? In the historian’s suggestion that the devastation of anthropogenic climate change might make the ‘Little Ice Age’ seem ‘trivial’ by comparison, however, Ghosh skirts around this problem. More pertinently to this essay, the historian’s reference to the encroaching wildfires during his impassioned argument is one instance of how Ghosh uses L.A to connect place and planet, and reiterate the urgency of the global crisis. I will elaborate on L.A’s symbolic status in the novel shortly, after first explaining how Gun Island’s treatment of the city represents a new iteration of a regional tradition.

‘Doom City’ and Disaster Fiction

Consciously or otherwise, Ghosh’s novel joins a long lineage of apocalyptic Los Angeles literature that reveals broader social concerns. In his comprehensive overview of 20th century L.A fiction and film, Mike Davis boldly claims that ‘no city [. . .] has been more likely to figure as the icon of a really bad future (or present, for that matter)’ (278). Los Angeles is the undisputed ‘Doom City’ of North America’s cultural imagination (Davis, 278). Pushing his argument further still, Davis contends that ‘disaster, as allusion, metaphor, or ambience, saturates almost everything now written about Southern California’ (280, my emphasis). Some of the reasons for this are obvious: earthquake, for instance, is the second most common ‘means of destruction’ in Davis’s survey, reflecting a persistent local unease (280). L.A’s residual environmental worries do not fully explain its literary annihilation in the last century, however. Davis’s general contention – which many regional critics have concurred with – is that the city has frequently been treated as a ‘giant lightning rod for disaster’, the ‘scapegoat for the collapse of the American century’ (354, 355). Indeed, fiction set in L.A has rarely just been about L.A. If the explosive growth of the city and its environs in post-war America was an ‘incontestable symbol of national prosperity’, the ‘Dickensian inequalities’ and other socio-economic problems of modern L.A inspire a ‘demonic image of a region where the future has already turned rancid’ (Davis, 354).

On a similar note, Patrick O’Donnell observes that many L.A novels present the city ‘eschatologically’, at the ‘far end of time and history’, the site of the American dream’s ‘collapse under the weight of its own excess’ (2010, 8). L.A’s position at the Western edge of the United States has invited a wealth of utopian and dystopian imaginings: it is perceived as the last hope for the fulfilment of the American project, or, more often, the location of its final demise. In David Seed’s work on the science-fiction literature of L.A, he argues that these speculative works represent localised versions of a classic American genre: ‘the jeremiad, which warns of the terrible consequences of national failure’ (1).
Writers have often paralleled ‘the fate of the city with that of the United States’, situating L.A as an allegory for the national (Seed, 1). Of course, the more recent rise in awareness about climate change – and the emergence of the Anthropocene concept – has revealed the ‘fate’ of Los Angeles to be inseparable from the health of the planet, as Ghosh demonstrates in Gun Island. For much of the last century, however, authors of L.A fiction prioritised the relationship between the regional and the national rather than place and planet.

No Los Angeles novel epitomises this conflation of city and country better than Nathanael West’s 1939 Hollywood satire The Day of the Locust, in which the myth of the California good life becomes a waking nightmare. Cited by Joan Didion as an example of a novel that ‘perceived’ the apocalyptic imagery of L.A, West’s book also actively perpetuated the notion that nightmarish visions lurk in the shadows of the sprawling, sun-soaked metropolis (201). At its climax, artist Tod Hackett – who assumes ‘the role of Jeremiah’ through his prophetic painting ‘The Burning of Los Angeles’ – is caught up in a flash mob outside a movie theatre (West 2006, 86). The frenzied members of this crowd are driven by ‘boredom and disappointment’ (171), having ‘slaved and saved’ all their lives for an idyllic California lifestyle that fails to deliver on its promise (172). The reality of the state can never meet collective expectation, a crushing revelation that is channeled into violent fantasies fuelled by lurid newspaper reports and Hollywood movies. The chaotic last moments of the novel recall Davis’s claim that L.A disaster fiction has often captured the ‘nervous breakdown of American exceptionalism’ (354). Indeed, David Fine argues that The Day of the Locust positions L.A as ‘the land of the disastrous finale, the place where the American road ends and turns back on itself at the edge of the continent’ (1989, 201). Los Angeles becomes a living hell rather than the Utopian endpoint of manifest destiny and Westward expansion, and, as a result, the oldest and most sacred of Euro-American narratives are called into question.

Of course, to theorise about the deep-seated historical factors behind L.A’s literary catastrophism is to risk overlooking rather more material matters. Fire and drought appear some way down Davis’s ‘means of destruction’ list (280), although floods and pollution are slightly higher, showing that the ‘ecocatastrophe novel’ has long been a fixture in the city’s cultural output (318). ‘The biological unsustainability of the giant city is now firmly lodged in contemporary doom consciousness,’ Davis states, because of how it has ‘toxified its natural setting’ (318). While Gun Island is not explicit in its critique of ruinous environmental practices at a strictly local level, its fire-consumed L.A can be interpreted as the logical destiny of a city that has often been considered the ‘Anti-Nature […] the place from where the destruction of nature emanates’ (Price, 222). The blazes that bewilder Deen during his stay in L.A might be understood as the inevitable repercussions of the unchecked encroachment of society into the natural world, a symptom of the ‘environmental suicide’ that has long haunted the city’s cultural consciousness (Davis, 318).

If L.A has long been a ‘place to read the national pulse’ in a sociological sense, Fine argues that the anxieties and apocalypses that emerge from its fiction are also rooted in wholly understandable fears about the hostility of the environment itself (2010, x). Fine further contends that the ‘geographical determinism’ of the city makes it ‘an obvious and inevitable choice for doomsday renderings’ (236). More to the point, depictions of ecological catastrophes in L.A fiction frequently sit alongside implicit diatribes about
‘human failure’, with the effect that some regional novels provide a ‘cosmic wake-up call to man’s destructive interventions on the fragile landscape’ (Fine, 236). This verdict returns us to the fire-blighted Los Angeles of Gun Island. The novel undoubtedly resembles the kind of literary call-to-action that Fine describes, using L.A as a device to address not just the state of the nation, but the state of the planet.

While Los Angeles literature has often been synonymous with dystopia, then, depicting the fallen city as a proxy for national narratives, Gun Island positions L.A as a case study for a planetary condition. Ghosh’s L.A often appears a hyperbolic hellscape beyond any hope of redemption, recalling Tod’s ‘The Burning of Los Angeles’ painting in The Day of the Locust. In this regard Gun Island seems to fit neatly into the lineage of the city’s literary destruction. This initial impression is somewhat misleading, however. Deen’s disorientating experience in the swelling inferno of L.A – along with other harrowing events in the Sundarbans and Venice – advances his ‘awakening’ to the global scale of our current environmental crisis (237). He comes to appreciate this enlightenment as a blessing rather than a burden. The psychological freedom that results from his acknowledgement of the crisis stands in stark contrast to the obliviousness and complacency he displays at the start of the novel.

Los Angeles, then, is both a site of distress and liberation in Gun Island. Although Ghosh’s fire-ravaged city appears to conform to the Jeremiad archetype of L.A fiction, it ultimately contributes to the development of Deen’s climate change consciousness, and the triumph of engagement over denial, repression or resignation. Ghosh therefore expands L.A’s historic status as a barometer of the ‘national pulse’ to encompass a much wider malaise, while also rejecting fatalism and urging collective resistance (Fine, x). The purpose of the historian’s L.A speech, after all, is to instil awareness rather than apathy in his audience, and stir them to action. Los Angeles is a vital component of the planetary worldview Ghosh seeks to sow in his characters and readers. Just as Deen slowly begins to make the mental connection between place and planet and appreciate the global continuities of the climate crisis, the reader is encouraged to envisage disparate regions as part of the same transnational network. The planetary systems of the Anthropocene are made visible by Ghosh’s unique approach to literary setting, a pivotal element of the contemporary realist mode witnessed in Gun Island, which I will now inspect.

‘Climate Realism’

The historian’s conference lecture is a breakthrough moment in Deen’s quest to understand the Bonduki Sadagar legend, and its possible relevance to the present day. The information shared by the historian about the ‘climatic perturbations’ of the 17th-century prompts Deen to wonder whether it is ‘possible that the legend was born of the tribulations of the Little Ice Age’ (136). The links between that era and the 21st-century are compounded by the dramatic wildfires raging outside the museum, and later by the flooding and tornado Deen experiences in Italy (where he learns more about the Bonduki Sadagar). Even considering Ghosh’s assertion in The Great Derangement that seemingly ‘improbable’ events are now ‘astoundingly real’, it must be considered extremely unlikely that the string of climate disasters portrayed in Gun Island would happen to one single person in the relatively short timeframe of the novel (127). Such events are of course
happening at an increasing rate around the world, though, fuelled by climate change. Ghosh propels his protagonist through this series of ordeals to demonstrate this planetary reality, and to underlie the notion that the parameters of the possible are widening all the time in the Anthropocene.

For Ursula Kluwick, the improbability and broad spatial sweep of Ghosh’s plot are closely linked:

In his engagement with the scale of climate change, Ghosh expands the scope of his novel to embrace an extraordinary, and sometimes preposterous, mass of settings, topics, events and characters […] They are brought together to suggest that nothing lies outside the reach of climate change and that everything contributes to and is implicated in the present state of the world (73).

In this assessment, the disparate settings of Gun Island are crucial elements of its general ambition to convey the global truths and implications of climate change. As we have seen, Ghosh has argued that an accurate picture of both the drivers and effects of the crisis cannot be rendered at a purely local level. If Gun Island’s transnational narrative appears unrealistic, Ghosh would no doubt argue this is because ‘serious’ literary realism has not traditionally accommodated the kind of planetary scope needed to comprehend the Anthropocene’s global continuities (The Great Derangement, 7).

In order to communicate the dizzying extent of environmental flux resulting from the climate crisis, Ghosh funnels scientific information through numerous characters, and particularly the biologist Piya. Her assertion that ‘nobody knows where they are anymore […] we’re living in a new world now’ (106) is a thematic counterpart to Deen’s observation about the ‘unstoppable velocities’ of human and nonhuman migration referenced earlier (181). If the sheer scale of ecological change described in Gun Island seems, again, improbable, such animal migrations are happening due to shifting temperatures, with many species appearing in regions far from their usual habitats. These realities often occur outside the scope of human perception, however, making it difficult for the public to understand – and authors to represent – the true ecological upheaval wrought by the climate crisis. If literary realism has historically failed to represent environmental events unfolding across vast spatial scales, as Ghosh contends in The Great Derangement, then the framework of ‘climate realism’ can shed light on how contemporary fiction might navigate these uncharted waters (Badia, Ceticin, and Diamanti 2020).

As Lynn Badia, Marija Ceticin and Jeff Diamanti point out, ‘the very concept of global warming is contingent on computational sophistication in the earth sciences’ (2020). Consequently, climate change exists beyond the realm of individual human experience. As a product of advanced scientific modelling, it ‘cannot be reduced to the view of a single type of observer, reader, or temporal horizon’ (Badia, Ceticin and Diamanti 2020). The authors conclude that ‘climate no longer presents itself as an event rendered for a human view’ (2020). Humans may experience specific weather incidents caused by climate change, but they cannot experience climate change itself. In Badia, Ceticin and Diamanti’s analysis, this has major implications for literary realism, which, in its classical form, was: ‘marked by an accumulation of detail directed at the standpoint of the human observer, so that moving slowly through the weight of the world signalled to a reader that this or that was “real”’ (2020). Ghosh retains the realist trope of a single human character
moving through the world – and he covers a lot of it. With each new climate disaster or strange animal sighting, however, Deen becomes less and less certain that what he is witnessing is in fact real, insofar as it departs drastically from the conception of reality he had hitherto known and trusted.

While Deen concedes that ‘nothing was outside the range of the probable’, he is adamant that the increasing improbability of his life is due to mere ‘chance’ (201). ‘To lose sight of that’ – to believe in some higher governing force rather than coincidence – is ‘to risk becoming untethered from reality,’ he concludes (201). In a metafictional reading, Deen’s confusion results from Ghosh’s use of him as a vehicle to demonstrate the planetary realities of the climate crisis. Moreover, Deen’s implausible, perilous journey in Gun Island can be viewed as a manifestation of climate realism. It represents Ghosh’s attempt to translate his knowledge of climate change – inevitably informed by scientific data and news media dissemination – into a narrative form which, initially at least, might still be recognisable as a work of realism. ‘The very concept of climate realism,’ write Badia, Cetinic, and Diamanti, ‘arrives expressively amidst a knotted space of understanding elemental media, the technical apparatus of climate science, and the various interpretants drawn to the scene’ (2020). The reason why Deen’s existence assumes an air of unreality is that his life – Ghosh’s novel – becomes an embodiment of all of these factors. The lives of real humans are not, after all, mere receptacles for the ‘knotted space’ of entities that construct what we know as climate change (2020).

In a clever example of narrative self-reflexivity Deen seems to become slowly aware that his life is not in his control, that he and Ghosh’s other protagonists are not the victims of pure ‘chance’ as he had once maintained. ‘[The] pattern was not of our own designing; it was as if something or someone had taken possession of us for reasons beyond our understanding’ (205). This is a sign of Deen’s creeping perception that he is essentially a literary device created to demonstrate a planetary state, as interpreted through the various mediating forces that comprise ‘climate realism’ and indeed climate change itself. Furthermore, Piya’s environmental information and Deen’s online research are forms of climate change mediation embedded within Gun Island. The novel, in turn, becomes its own form of mediation – one of the ‘interpretants drawn to the scene’ that adds to our sense of what climate change is (Badia, Cetinic, and Diamanti 2020). If Ghosh’s characters can be considered products of climate realism, so can his settings, and especially Los Angeles.

Los Angeles as Planetary Symptom

Ghosh’s portrayals of the climate catastrophes Deen experiences across three continents are undoubtedly influenced by digital and news media. For instance, Ghosh supposedly imagined a very similar blaze to the ‘Skirball Fire’ before that event occurred, and so presumably relied on news reports and digital footage to inform his depiction. In this sense, Ghosh’s Los Angeles emerges from a ‘knotted space’ of mediation rather than lived, authentic experience (Badia, Cetinic, and Diamanti 2020). While all of Gun Island’s settings are clearly shaped by Ghosh’s intellectual engagement with climate communication channels (he often retweets global environmental news on Twitter), this is most true of Los Angeles.
The author’s representations of the Sundarbans and Venice conjure a more expansive sense of place than that of L.A, which seems to possess almost no regional distinctiveness or history aside from a few brief allusions to Hollywood. Any trace of topographical or social singularity is hidden behind all-consuming walls of fire and smoke. As I have explained, though, disasters such as that depicted in Gun Island have long been prominent in L.A’s literary imaginary, and the novel’s inferno is therefore somewhat consistent with the catastrophism lurking within the city’s cultural legacy. This aspect of regional identity is entangled with the climate emergency in Gun Island, enabling Ghosh to address a planetary reality from an apparently regional perspective. Before elaborating upon the author’s curious illustration of L.A, I will first demonstrate the ways in which he makes unlikely narrative leaps between the city and the Sundarbans; and, by symbolic extension, between the Global South and Global North. Ghosh links these two places, which would seem radically different in almost all respects, to underline the scale of the climate crisis and endorse a planetary ethical and political outlook. A small amount of further plot context is required before I conduct this close analysis.

The peculiar feeling of ‘possession’ that overcomes Deen as the novel progresses originates during a disorientating visit to a shrine deep in the Sundarbans mangrove, whose exterior narrates the Bonduki Sadagar myth in a series of cryptic symbols (121). After Tipu is bitten by a king cobra lurking within the shrine, he enters into a trance-like state and has visions of snakes, which he claims are ‘everywhere’ (89). This is the first sign that the Bonduki Sadagar has become unfrozen and is now ‘alive’ (83). While Deen initially seems to have avoided the malaise that has gripped Tipu, he soon feels as though he has also been infected by a mysterious and potent force:

> It was as if some living thing had entered my body, something ancient that had long lain dormant in the mud. I could only think of it in analogy to germs or viruses or bacteria, yet I know it was none of those things: it was memory itself, except that it was not my own; it was much older than me, some submerged aspect of time that had been brought suddenly to life when I entered that shrine – something fearsome, venomous and overwhelmingly powerful, something that would not allow me to be rid of it (113).

The Bonduki Sadagar legend has penetrated Deen, and thus the present-day narrative, revealing a first vague outline of the connections between the 17th and 21st centuries that will be deepened later in the historian’s keynote lecture. Accompanying Deen’s sensation of a ‘submerged aspect of time’ is a flickering awareness of the environmental crises of the ‘Little Ice Age’ and today. Indeed, his ‘possession’ will eventually evolve into his climate change ‘awakening’ (237).

Initially, Deen believes that flying back to his home in New York from Kolkata airport will herald a ‘return to sanity’ (111) after the ‘extended hallucination’ of his Sundarbans experience (110). He expects to forge a neat division between the ‘wild tangle of mud and mangrove’ and his civilised Brooklyn lifestyle, and between the tumult of the Global South and perceived comfort of the Global North (111). To travel from Kolkata to Brooklyn ‘was to switch between two states of mind’ (113). Deen cannot shake off the debilitating symptoms of his possession when back in the US, however, finding himself stuck in a stupor and ‘unable to work’ (113). It is only when he boards a flight to Los Angeles, to attend the conference at which Cinta is giving a lecture, that he seems to have
returned to some semblance of normality. He is conscious, ‘for the first time in many months, of a pleasurable sense of anticipation’, his newfound contentment aided by his business class seat with its ‘elaborate entertainment system’ and ‘noise-cancelling headset’ (125). This latter device symbolises the desirous possibility of shutting out both the invasive presence of the myth and his growing sensitivity to environmental crisis.

Deen has clearly forgotten an ominous call he had before the flight with Tipu, though, who appears to have gained prophetic powers as a consequence of the cobra bite. Tipu warns Deen about a possible hazard waiting in or en route to L.A, which might get him ‘all freaked out’: ‘Maybe you’ll see a snake or somethin’ on the way’ (123). Deen is dismissive, unable to resist bragging of his business class flight. He does not foresee any kind of upheaval occurring during his stay in California, especially as the conference delegates are to be ‘hosted in great style’ at a ‘famously wealthy institution’ (125). There is reason to be sceptical of Deen’s naivety or presumptuousness here. Given L.A’s historic record of wildfire, it seems inconceivable that Deen would not have even considered the prospect of disturbance in the city. Such instances of this barely credible ignorance support Abhrajyoti Chakraborty’s criticism that Deen’s ‘perpetual astonishment seems more improbable than any environmental disaster portrayed in the novel’ (The New Republic, 2019). Indeed, before the plane has even touched down in Los Angeles, Deen will have cause to regret his brazen disregard of Tipu’s message.

Far from escaping his ‘possession’ on the long-haul flight, Deen instead descends further into its discombonating depths. He is forced to acknowledge that he will not leave his dawning awareness of the climate crisis behind in the Sundarbans; it will be with him wherever he goes, lingering inside him across oceans and borders. Ghosh draws a number of metaphorical links between the Sundarbans and L.A before Deen has even arrived at his destination. Just after he has ‘settled in contentedly’, Deen overhears a conversation between two fellow passengers – who ‘looked like ‘Hollywood people’ (126) – containing the words ‘fire’ and ‘evacuation’ (125). In another example of Deen’s naivety, he initially believes the pair are discussing a film project, before realising that there is ‘some sort of emergency […] currently unfolding in Los Angeles’ (126). Wildfires have been ‘raging’ for days, forcing tens of thousands of people to leave their homes (126). Ghosh’s association between Hollywood and news of environmental disaster returns us to one of his core contentions in The Great Derangement: that events which might once have been associated with science-fiction are now ‘astoundingly real’ (127).

Although fleeting, this reference to Hollywood is a significant moment in Deen’s environmental awakening, as he eventually accepts that the city of dreams – and other illustrious Global North cities – may be vulnerable to material threats. The initial disjuncture between spatial identity and environmental reality is rather jarring, however: particularly when the captain announces that ‘passengers on the left side of the plane might even be able to see some smoke’, as though he is breezily pointing out the Hollywood sign or the Beverly Hills mansion of a famous actor (127). Here the fires become just another part of L.A’s distinct allure, even while they threaten its very infrastructure. If L.A has always been a city of spectacle, Ghosh incorporates climate catastrophe into that regional reputation. The cultural connotations of L.A become intimately entangled with the effects of a global crisis, and place and planet are shown to be inextricable. Ghosh’s planetary scope is reiterated once more.
Looking to his smartphone to verify the overheard conversation, Deen discovers video footage of the fires and rises ‘inadvertently’ to his feet, ‘startled’ by what he has seen (126). In another instance of the climate realism mediation discussed by Badia, Cetinic and Diamanti, Ghosh evokes an image of the fire-blighted L.A before the plane has even taken off at Kolkata. The internet enables Deen’s first glimpse of the city, and indeed the reader’s. By introducing us to the novel’s L.A through a worldwide information source rather than the lived experience of a character, Ghosh again prioritises the global over the local. The boundedness of place is breached by evidence of planetary patterns communicated on a global network.

Ghosh’s emphasis on the planetary is further demonstrated by an unfortunate episode that occurs after Deen has learned of the fires. Holding up his phone to show the air stewardess an online news article about the blazes, to explain why he is on his feet during take-off, he accidentally triggers the Bluetooth speaker in the overhead cabin, which begins to play one of his favourite pieces of Indian classical music (126, 127). This has the symbolic effect of overlaying India onto L.A, as the traditional music blares out over the wildfire news piece. Again the transnational connections of the Anthropocene are stressed, facilitated by digital technology. Globalisation and the climate crisis are thus amalgamated in Ghosh’s planetary narrative, echoing Heise’s call for a ‘sense of planet’ as a consequence of both these global processes (56). The mental separation Deen is keen to strike between the ‘wild’ Global South and civilised Global North – embodied by the grandeur and luxury of the conference venue – is denied by the digital reproduction of environmental catastrophe in California, and, more abstractly, Ghosh’s metaphorical associations between L.A and India (111). As a result, Deen’s ‘possession’ is exacerbated rather than eased by his Westward journey.

Deen’s earlier dismissal of Tipu’s warning predictably comes back to bite him in the form of real and imagined snakes, both on the flight and when he has arrived in L.A. First, he sees a bird drop a snake from its mouth while gliding above the embers of a fire-ravaged forest, letting out an involuntary ‘scream’ at the sight (129). He is later told by airport security that he had been shouting the words ‘Snake! Snake!’ during the episode, apparently unconsciously (130). Later still, when he has finally made it to his hotel room in L.A, he falls asleep after gazing out of his window at a ‘landscape […] ablaze with fire’, and dreams of a ‘glowing snake hurtling towards me, through the flames’ (131). Ghosh repeats this serpent imagery for a few interrelated reasons: to indicate the penetrative presence of the Bonduki Sadagar myth and particularly the snake goddess Manasa Devi; to refer back to the incident with the king cobra in the Sundarbans shrine that triggered Deen’s ‘possession’; and ultimately to illustrate the planetary connections exposed by the Anthropocene in his leaps between the Sundarbans and L.A.

By symbolically collapsing the divide between Global South (imperilled) and Global North (safe) in this way, Ghosh strives for a new mode of planetary realism, which has much in common with Badia, Cetinic and Diamanti’s ‘climate realism’ (2020). Gun Island does not try to capture the lived experience of a particularly turbulent California fire season, despite initial appearances, and Deen’s ordeal should not necessarily be taken at face value. Almost literally every time he looks upon the L.A landscape – from the plane, the hotel window, the hilltop outside the conference venue – his vision is overwhelmed by fire or smoke. At various points the blazes ‘fill the horizon, from end to end’
(131), ‘a dark cloud [...] rear[s] up above the horizon’ (134), the landscape is ‘inferno-like’ due to ‘towering columns of flame’ (146). The fires have a ‘mesmerizing’ and ‘riveting’ psychological effect (131, 134) and appear to evade accurate perception: despite seeming close they are ‘actually many miles away’ (131), possibly ‘still in the same place’ as earlier in the day, but possibly having ‘moved a little closer [...] it was difficult to be sure’ (138).

The fires, in short, completely conceal the city’s topography and scramble human cognition. Deen’s perception is so pressurised that he cannot verify the evidence of his own eyes. This mind-bending hellscapc can be understood through the prism of climate realism. Where once a realist novel would feature an ‘accumulation of detail’ directed at a ‘human observer’, whose movement through the world would signal to the reader ‘that this or that was ‘real”’, *Gun Island’s* protagonist is increasingly doubtful about his own ability to perceive, let alone convey, reality (Badia, Ceticin, and Diamanti 2020). The novel’s brand of climate realism therefore ‘calls for us to consider that what it means to be a human observer is to [...] veer toward and with an altered sense of meaning-making [...] weirding the coherence of the world” (Badia, Ceticin, and Diamanti 2020). The reason that Deen cannot comprehend or process what he is seeing is not simply because the fires elude perception. It is also because he is witnessing, and living, Ghosh’s version of climate realism, a localised representation of a planetary condition which deranges ‘the coherence of the world’. In the throes of his possession, signs of the climate crisis are now apparent to Deen wherever he goes, to an extent that would be unlikely for any real person travelling between the places he visits. The notion of arriving in L.A to find the city so comprehensively engulfed by fire, for example, is surely still rather improbable, even in this era of worsening environmental tumult.

Rather than aiming for an accurate reflection of physical space, then, Ghosh embroils his protagonist within a narrative of climate realism, in which the scientific facts of planetary flux permeate his waking reality. Deen becomes increasingly aware that his life is an embodiment of a planetary plight, that he lacks agency in himself, as evidenced by his paranoiac observations about ‘hidden forces deciding everything’ (201). In Los Angeles, Ghosh’s numerous references to snakes, in one instance superimposed over Deen’s dream of fire, signals the self-reflexivity of Ghosh’s plot and reiterates to Deen that he is undergoing a psychological or even existential shift that exceeds his control. Initially perceived as a malaise, he eventually interprets this shift as a source of enlightenment which has ‘broken a spell of bewitchment’, meaning his earlier obliviousness to the climate crisis (294).

Reaffirming the novel’s planetary scale, Ghosh’s descriptions of the Los Angeles wildfires are drenched in aquatic allusions. The word ‘tsunami’ appears three times in ten pages, linking the city with the storms, coastal erosion and flooding depicted in the novel’s other two main settings, the Sundarbans and Venice (134, 138, 144). These narrative continuities reiterate the idea that Deen will not escape his newfound climate awareness by simply moving across human-constructed boundaries. More broadly, the reader is constantly reminded of other forms of environmental turbulence – and therefore other regions around the world – while simultaneously imagining the literary landscape of *Gun Island’s* L.A.

The only time Deen is free of the fires is at Venice Beach, which appears ‘fresher [...] than elsewhere’, but even here he cannot avoid environmental disturbance (144). He
witnesses a non-native, poisonous yellow-bellied snake bite and kill a dog owned by his expat Italian friend Gisa. This incident upends the popular perception of the beach as a vibrant, untroubled tourist trap. Cinta’s incredulity at this event – ‘I don’t believe it. The dog is dead, of a snake bite! Here in L.A’ – again suggests that regional knowledge systems will have to be revised as a result of ecological and atmospheric changes (145). The alarmed cries of Gisa’s son in response to the snake sighting – ‘Serpente! Serpente!’ – are an exact translation of Deen’s earlier unconscious outburst on the plane, a narrative leap that crosses regional borders and exposes the looming spectre of the Manasa Devi once more (144).

Deen and Cinta cannot make sense of the snake’s appearance at Venice Beach until Piya relays information from an article she has read about the serpent species relocating due to warming waters (147). Deen requires the mediating input of biological research, news communication, and finally a direct conversation with a scientist in order to understand what he has just seen. Los Angeles is thus positioned as a case study of climate realism, a setting that cannot be sufficiently comprehended without the interventions of climate science and media reports. Ghosh’s illustration of the city therefore demonstrates that his version of climate realism and his transnational narrative are intimately connected. Gun Island’s representation of the place-planet interrelation in the Anthropocene is guided by the ‘knotted space’ of global mediating forces (Badia, Cetinic, and Diamanti 2020).

The impression of Los Angeles that emerges from Gun Island, then, is a paradoxical one. Ghosh undoubtedly chose the city as one of his main settings because of its global renown, connotations of glamour, and enduring association with Hollywood. In his localisation of the climate crisis, however, the billowing blowback of anthropogenic environmental degradation obscures the city’s topography almost completely. The most striking element of L.A’s distinct regional identity in Gun Island is the apocalyptic firescape itself, which both channels deep-seated regional anxieties and reveals a global emergency. While the novel’s L.A does not resemble the kind of detailed evocation of place often found in literary realism, it does gesture towards a new climate-conscious mode of representation, and, in tandem, a planetary worldview.

**Conclusion: Place as Planet**

Los Angeles’ status as a planetary symptom in Gun Island is epitomised not just by the ubiquitous fires but also the inevitable sign of the serpent. Aside from his vivid portrayals of blazes and snakes, sometimes simultaneously, Ghosh’s descriptions of the L.A landscape are oddly bland. The city consists of: ‘panoramic views stretching from the hills in the east to the sea on the western horizon’ (134); ‘bright California sunlight’ (138); ‘orderly, neatly designed neighbourhoods’ (146). Venice Beach is a ‘broad, seemingly endless runway of sand’ (144). Perhaps these rather generic observations can be justified as the fleeting impressions of a traveller passing through, but more pertinently they signal Ghosh’s disinterest in representing the detail of this diverse and distinct city. As is the case in the novel generally, planet takes precedence over place. Before Deen has even emerged blinking into the California sun after being detained at the airport for his flight hysterics, he perceives his West Coast trip to have been: ‘a terrible idea from the start […]
there was something ill-fated about it’ (129). Deen seems resigned to a predetermined doom, and his early suspicion is vindicated by his distressing stay in L.A. This approach to literary setting arguably risks reducing the city to another macabre sideshow in the ‘apocalypse theme park’ Los Angeles has often resembled in dystopian fiction and film (Davis, 7). What might initially appear a narrative flaw, however, should be primarily perceived as a trait of a realist form less concerned with imitative spatial depictions and more with evoking a broader sense of planet. Ghosh overlays planet onto place and consciously conceals material space with various manifestations of the same overarching system. By positioning L.A as an indicator of a global malaise – connected in its flux and precarity to remote regions around the world – he shows how the climate crisis has pervaded every place on Earth, Global South and Global North, no matter how storied and illustrious. L.A is metaphorically aligned with the Sundarbans to highlight both the environmental injustices exacerbated by climate change and the vast difference in cultural reactions towards it.

While the physical effects of the crisis can only be felt by individuals at a local level, *Gun Island* suggests that an understanding of climate change as an entire concept requires a planetary consciousness, and is heavily dependent on forms of scientific and technological mediation that are not tied to place. Rather than attempting to conjure a mimetic picture of the city, Ghosh’s Los Angeles – as a key element of his transnational narrative – provides a portal to the planetary, illuminating atmospheric and ecological processes that transcend and blur regional borders. In its engagement with the ‘place and planet’ interrelation discussed by Ursula Heise, the novel positions place as planet, urging an imaginative shift beyond human-constructed boundaries and towards a conception of the Earth as a ‘living organism’ (Elias and Moraru, xxiii). In Ghosh’s sweeping Anthropocene epic, then, Los Angeles no longer just exposes regional or national anxieties, but a planetary condition.

### Note

1. By far the biggest reason for L.A’s imagined demise in Davis’s study is nuclear destruction, with invasion by ‘hordes’ or ‘monsters’ in third place (280). Davis interprets this as evidence that ‘racial anxiety’ – ‘white fear of the dark races’ – was the key motivator behind the city’s devastation in culture (281). As Los Angeles began to lose its white-Anglo majority, the city, previously at threat from invading extra-terrestrial forces in film and fiction, became itself the alien, and American novelists and filmmakers reduced it to rubble to vanquish the racial ‘other’ (Davis, 326). The ‘ritual sacrifice’ of Los Angeles should thus be understood as ‘part of a malign syndrome, whose celebrants include the darkest forces in American history’ (Davis, 354, 355). In other words, a scrutiny of the (perhaps unconscious) psychological drivers behind L.A’s fictional destruction exposes the lingering spectre of racism.

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Notes on contributor

*Edwin Gilson* is an AHRC Techne-funded doctoral researcher at the University of Surrey, focusing on representations of climate change and the Anthropocene in contemporary Californian fiction. After graduating with first-class honours in BA and MA American Literature at Goldsmiths, University of London, and University College Dublin respectively, he worked as a journalist and press officer. The working title of his doctoral thesis is: ‘Place and Planet: Localising the Anthropocene in Contemporary Californian Fiction’.

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