

The “Living in the End Times” Conference

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“On the eastern horizon there’s a greyish haze, lit now with a rosy, deadly glow. Strange how that colour still seems tender. He gazes at it with rapture; there is no other word for it. Rapture. The heart seized, carried away, as if by some large bird of prey. After everything that’s happened, how can the world still be so beautiful? Because it is. From the offshore towers come the avian shrieks and cries that sound like nothing human” (439).

– *Oryx and Crake*, by Margaret Atwood

“Clark looks up at the evening activity on the tarmac, at the planes that have been grounded for twenty years, the reflection of his candle flickering in the glass. He has no expectation of seeing an airplane rise again in his lifetime, but is it possible that somewhere there are ships setting out? If there are again towns with streetlights, if there are symphonies and newspapers, then what else might this awakening world contain?” (332).

– *Station Eleven*, by Emily St. John Mandel

As Kim Stanley Robinson put it in his keynote address, the “Living in the End Times: Utopian and Dystopian Representations of Pandemics in Fiction, Film, and Culture” conference was “both a symptom and a diagnostic of the time that we’re in.” Hosted by Cappadocia University in Turkey, the conference took place virtually on Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Discord from Jan 13 to Jan 15, 2021. It sought to explore not only representations of pandemics in a variety of narratives, but also to examine what might come after, searching for that faint glint of hope amongst the despair and destruction -- an echoing of the dystopian, utopian, posthuman, and even personal seen through key pandemic texts like Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven* (2014). “Living in the End Times” featured 4 keynotes and 50 panels, with a total of 200 speakers from 40 different countries. The keynotes included scholar-authors Kim Stanley Robinson, Larissa Lai, and Maggie Gee, as well as Professor Elizabeth Outka and the members of the newly-formed Dystopia Project (Raffaella Baccolini, Laurence Davis, Patricia McManus, Tom Moylan, Darko Suvin, and Phillip E. Wegner). This truly international endeavor—whose multiple timezones and myriad concurrent panels certainly kept the organizing committee up at night—was ironically made possible by the very pandemic that has kept us all physically apart.

Its inception began, however, in the flesh. Many of the conference organizers met at the Utopian Studies Society Europe’s 2019 conference in Prato, Italy, and the friendships and camaraderie that began there found their way to the core of this virtual endeavor. The pandemic formed the backdrop of the conference not only as its subject-matter, but also its materiality—we very much missed the visceral and embodied aspects of an in-person conference. We reminisced

about the Utopian comrade spirit that we developed during the heatwave in Prato, which involved chats over coffee and cakes, drinks together on balmy terraces, and swimming in lakes. Instead, we found ourselves sitting in front of computer screens in different rooms, climates, and time zones. Some of us had birdsong in the background, while others had hammer drills and building noise. In some ways, our separation and alienation could be seen to resemble a dystopian landscape in comparison to our adventure in Prato.

Nevertheless, the utopian impulse is no stranger to genre-bending and working through different forms and mediums. The online conference created other types of relationships and engagement that we could not otherwise have imagined. The sheer amount of work that went into the logistical effort of organizing the conference meant that the organizers bonded strongly over the adventure despite living in different time zones for the duration. We learnt the tech together, we experienced the tech failures together, and we had a ‘backstage chat’ in a WhatsApp group that was an ongoing source of mutual support and laughter. We are grateful to the representatives from Cappadocia University, who showed their generosity through their virtual presence and support throughout the conference, including their participation in the Opening Ceremony. We are also very grateful to the Cappadocia IT team, who spent hours and hours creating links, prepping how-to documents, and monitoring panels. The Cappadocia cat, Black Mirror, was also a source of joy in stressful times—and indeed part of the fun of the virtual format more generally were the cameos from presenters’ pets.

The format of the conference also meant that it was much larger, more diverse and more inclusive than an in-person conference, where people would be required to acquire visas, pay for travel, and book their accommodation. This had its pitfalls as well as benefits, and when several speakers dropped-out at the last minute, we learned the lesson that offering a virtual conference for free does not necessarily generate the same levels of commitment in some attendees, despite taking at least as much work to organize. We also experienced the dystopian side of virtual events thanks to a Zoom-bombing during the “Musical Oasis” concert performed by Natali Boghossian and Hans van Beelen, just prior to the arrival of the Ambassador of Canada to Turkey, who was making a surprise appearance to kick off Larissa Lai and Maggie Gee’s keynote address. Luckily, with help from the Cappadocian IT team, we were able to pivot to new, locked links (paired with YouTube simul-streaming), allowing the conference to continue.

Despite this interruption, the conference was a resounding success, and we were consistently taken aback by the multiplicity of approaches and imaginaries that went into the presentations we saw. Even if we had several books worth of space, it would be impossible to do justice to this diversity, but in this symposium collection, we have gathered 14 papers demonstrating the breadth of work that was presented and discussed at “Living in the End Times.” The authors hail from a wide range of countries, including Turkey, Australia, the UK, Portugal, Hungary, Uruguay, and Canada, and their research subjects range from podcasts to posthumanism, from queer theory to mountain anthropology, and from postcolonialism to creative practice. We hope that this symposium will act as a taster, rousing your curiosity and prompting you to seek out more utopian

perspectives and spaces in, against, and beyond the end times. With that in mind, we also attempt here to summarize some of the most important key themes to come out of the conference -- those which merit further thought, exploration, and utopian adventures.

The outbreak of COVID-19 wrought spatial, socioeconomic, and political upheavals and laid bare existing structural inequalities within global capitalist systems. Several papers at the conference found resonances of the severity and scale of the pandemic in eco-dystopian fiction works such as Margaret Atwood's increasingly prescient *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003-2013). A key theme here is using dystopian 'end time' extrapolations to disrupt our blindness to the stark inequities and injustices of our own times. While multitudes face the economic hardships of a looming global recession, the planet's wealthy elite have found refuge in their exclusive 'utopias' of private medical and security staff, escape mansions, and luxury doomsday bunkers. Kroon (this issue) argues against seeking inclusion in the oppressive and debased structures of the status quo through policy change and reformism, arguing instead for the radical hope of the 'queer utopia,' which says 'yes' to 'non-normative ways of being.' The pandemic, and its dystopian reflections and representations, serves as an augur of further socio-ecological perturbations to come should global capitalism's relentless exploitation of species and ecosystems continue unabated.

This brings us to another key theme: the posthuman, and our relationships with non-human beings, the viral, and to nature and technology. In this vein, Horn and Martin mobilize concepts from posthumanism and feminist new materialism to identify an 'ontology of networked agency' in Greg Bear's *Darwin's Radio*. Aĝin and Horzum focus on the entanglement of (diseased) human bodies with non-human bodies and matter, from ecto-parasites in hair follicles to microbiota in our gut, asking: How, then, are we to understand ourselves and our own agency? Pandemics bring to light the intricate and inextricable entanglements between humans and myriad Earth others, and the realization that we are far from the only actors with the agency to engender world-shattering transformations.

Such times of widespread upheaval render the perennial utopian (and dystopian) imaginary especially valuable, namely through the key utopian and dystopian function of educating desire through critique and consciousness-raising—another key conference theme. The educative function of utopia can be explicit and enacted through pedagogy within and beyond higher education institutions, which was explored during the conference in lively detail by Dan Byrne Smith, Caroline Edwards, Adam Stock, and Darren Web in their Roundtable, "Whither Hope? Teaching Utopia(nism) Through the Pandemic Crisis," which was a highlight of the event for many. The educative function of utopia also takes place in the cultural sphere. Burt finds a potential grassroots, collectivist utopianism in Brazilian podcasts using audio drama as a medium for dystopian storytelling.

While utopias offer imaginative projections of better worlds and ways of being, dystopias extrapolate from the deficient 'present' and offer projections of potentially nightmarish futures. Inherent within both are critique, imagination, and desire for the 'better,' or the queering and

transgression of taken-for-granted borders and boundaries (Sargisson). Thinking beyond the spatial, temporal, and conceptual boundaries of the decaying status quo is essential for building beyond the current ‘eco-dystopian’ era of pandemics, extinctions, and ecological collapse. Marks explores how the utopian, messianic conception of history found in the works of Walter Benjamin transgresses the homogeneous empty time of capitalism. Denning expresses a utopian aesthetics of temporality that transgresses egotistical mainstream conceptions in which humans place themselves at the centre.

Pandemics and the spectre of eco-apocalypse do not signal the end of all worlds or times but merely of the world as presently constituted. For this is a world of many worlds (de la Cadena & Blaser), with other modes of being long preceding, existing alongside, and yet to come after Western capitalist modernity. Our interdisciplinary conference critically and imaginatively explored the vital question of what might come after capitalism and the Anthropocene. The spectacular array of excellent papers that were presented at this conference touched on many pertinent themes. Discussions often centered around posthuman reflections on the reworking of borders and boundaries—conceptual, bodily, spatial, temporal—engendered by viral happenings, effects that ‘end-time’ events like pandemics have upon hope and utopian imaginaries more generally, as well as how we ought to co-construct more ethical and liveable worlds after the ‘end’ imposed by late-stage capitalism on so many earthly collectives. Our final keynote roundtable with veterans in the fields of science fiction, utopian and dystopian studies—Raffaella Baccolini, Laurence Davis, Patricia McManus, Tom Moylan, Darko Suvin and Phillip Wegener—ended on a suitably hopeful note with Tom Moylan concluding: “This conference has responded to the ‘end times’ and resoundingly said, ‘No, another world is possible!’”

Works Cited

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Nora Castle is a PhD student in the Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies at the University of Warwick, UK. Her research, funded by the Chancellor's International Scholarship, is at the intersection of environmental humanities, food studies, and science fiction studies. Her project, entitled 'Food, Foodways, and Environmental Crisis in Contemporary Speculative Fiction', focuses on the future of food in sf narratives of ecological stress. Nora has recently published a chapter on Sixth Extinction cannibalism in contemporary sf in *Interdisciplinary Essays on Cannibalism: Bites Here and There* (Routledge, 2021) and has a forthcoming chapter (with Esthie Hugo) in *Technologies of Feminist Speculative Fiction* (Palgrave) on food technology and feminism in contemporary sf from the Global South. She has previously published in the field of East Asian Studies. Nora is co-editing a special issue of *Science Fiction Studies* on 'Food Futures' with Graeme Macdonald (March 2022) as well as a special issue of *Green Letters* on 'Animal Futurity' with Giulia Champion (Jan/Feb 2022).

Heather Alberro recently completed her PhD at Nottingham Trent University's Department of Politics and International Relations. Her background and interests span a range of disciplines including green utopianism, critical posthuman theory, environmental ethics, and political ecology. Her publications include the 2020 article, "Valuing Life Itself": On Radical Environmental Activists' Post-Anthropocentric Worldviews' published in the *Journal of Environmental Values*, and 'Interspecies' in the upcoming *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Anthropocene*. Heather also serves as co-convenor for the Political Studies Association's (PSA) environmental politics specialist group, and as Chair of the PSA's Early Career Network (ECN).

Emrah Atasoy is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Humanities at Cappadocia University, Turkey. He completed his PhD at Hacettepe University's Department of English Language and Literature in 2019 with a dissertation on twentieth-century dystopian fiction entitled "From Ignorance to Experience: Epistemology and Power in Katharine Burdekin's *Swastika Night*, Anthony Burgess's *The Wanting Seed* and P. D. James's *The Children of Men*." He spent an academic year as a visiting scholar under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor at Penn State University between 2015 and 2016. His most recent publications include the article, "Pandemics and Epidemics in Speculative Fiction" (2020), published by Ankara University Journal of Languages and History-Geography and the chapter "Epistemological Warfare(s) in Dystopian Narrative: Zülfü Livaneli's Son Ada and Anthony Burgess's *The Wanting Seed*" in *Speculations of War: Essays on Conflict in Science Fiction, Fantasy and Utopian Literature* (2021), edited by Annette M. Magid. He is a member of both Utopian Studies Society-Europe and the Society for Utopias Studies (SUS). His fields of scholarly interest include speculative fiction, dystopia, utopia, science fiction, apocalyptic fiction, Turkish utopianism, and twentieth-century literature.

Conrad Scott holds a PhD from and is an Instructor in the University of Alberta's Department of English and Film Studies, on Treaty 6 / Métis lands. He researches contemporary sf and environmental literature, and his current project examines the interconnection between place,

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Rhiannon Firth is a political theorist and writer, a Senior Research Fellow in Sociology at the University of Essex and author of *Utopian Politics: Citizenship and Practice* (Routledge 2012). She has written two books on anarchist disaster relief social movements: *Coronavirus, Class and Mutual Aid in the UK* (with John Preston, Palgrave 2020) and *Disaster Anarchy* (forthcoming, Pluto, 2021). She wrote the Afterword for the new edition of M.L. Berneri's *Journey Through Utopia* (PM Press, 2019) She can be found on Twitter at @RhiFirth.