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Gerry Canavan

Jennifer Cooke

Caroline Edwards

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Apocalypse Now: Covid-19 and the SF Imaginary

Gerry Canavan, Jennifer Cooke and Caroline Edwards in conversation with Paul March-Russell

The following conversation was conducted via Google Docs between 1st May and 23rd June 2020. The participants were Gerry Canavan (Marquette University), Jennifer Cooke (Loughborough University) and Caroline Edwards (Birkbeck College, London). Gerry is President of the SFRA; his books include *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction* (2014), co-edited with Kim Stanley Robinson, *Octavia E. Butler* (2016), and most recently *The Cambridge History of Science Fiction* (2019), co-edited with Eric Carl Link. Jennifer is a poet and academic; her first book was on *Legacies of Plague in Literature, Theory, and Film* (2009) while her most recent is *Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing: The New Audacity* (2020). Caroline's books include *Utopia and the Contemporary British Novel* (2019) and, with Tony Venezia, *China Miéville: Critical Essays* (2015); she is also editor of *Alluvium* and co-founder with Martin Eve of the Open Library of Humanities.

Paul March-Russell: Can I ask, how have you all been coping during the pandemic? My responses have ranged from anxiety to acceptance, probably spurred-on by having a very busy household. Yet at the same time there's no one, universal experience, so how has it been for you?
Jennifer Cooke: As an academic, with a house and a garden, I am privileged and I already spend a lot of time working from home or in libraries so that was not a challenge. I'm also on research leave, which has saved me, so far, from the scrabble to take all teaching online, although I do not think we will return fully to face-to-face teaching in October so I probably have all that ahead. Research leave has been disrupted by the closure of the British Library, of course, but there are aspects of my plans I can complete. Emotionally, I was extremely anxious at the start of cases in the UK because of the government's slow response, the horrifying herd immunity strategy, and the presence of the arrogant assumption that somehow we would not be subject to the ravages of the disease in the same way other countries were. Lives were lost needlessly. I was angry and anxious about that, but oddly calm about the way the disease would itself unfold and what needed to happen. During lockdown, I was calmer. I miss the bustle of London. As lockdown begins to lift, I am anxious about what lies ahead. My partner is not an academic and the institution he works for is bringing in a high number of compulsory redundancies, so I am personally worried, but more broadly, my confidence in the UK government's competence is extremely low and I cannot see how, with plans as they are, we can avoid a second wave.
Gerry Canavan: By chance, I was also on research leave this semester, so I too was spared the chaos of the move to 'remote learning' (which I am

grateful for). With two young children at home my life has been transformed into an all-day home school, both before and after my local school district moved to its virtual learning platform – with all our favourite places inaccessible it has been a struggle to keep everyone on an even keel, much less preventing either the children or us from becoming overly anxious. In the span of a few weeks it seems as though the future has completely collapsed; where I once spent my time worrying about climate change and its deformation of my children's futures decades from now, I am now petrified by the prospect of living through a significant economic depression that could last years, or a decade, or longer – at which time climate change will still catch up to us! It is very hard to be optimistic, especially as both governments and non-governmental organizations in the West have proven themselves totally inadequate to the task of administering this crisis, and, as Jennifer says, seem to have thrown us all into this lockdown without any plan, and are now simply seeking to scrap the whole thing and expose huge segments of the population to biological danger in the name of the smooth functioning of capitalism.

Caroline Edwards: It's been such an emotional rollercoaster. I'm extremely conscious of the privilege of having a job where I can work from home and not be under immediate threat of redundancy (although this is increasingly not the case for academics in UK universities), and, although my partner is in the vulnerable category of people who need to self-shield, our experience has been relatively similar to our PhD days. I think what makes me sad is that the years of anxiety and depression that I've experienced within the neoliberal university system have prepared me for this kind of experience – the constant fear and uncertainty, feeling that you have little control over your own life or future, working all hours to try and keep up with an unrealistic volume of work, and being unable to socialise with friends or family. When lockdown first became a lived reality, it honestly felt like very little had changed. The main difference was, perhaps like Gerry, trying to keep our toddler entertained without being able to go outside. Although I initially felt completely overwhelmed by having to work and look after my 20-month-old daughter in the same space there have been some funny moments. Not realising my audio and video were switched on during a departmental team meeting and that 40 colleagues could see me frantically running around the kitchen whilst Aeli threw egg at *Bing* on the TV and sat spooning hummus into her lap was quite a comedy moment. Under these conditions, workplaces cannot ignore their employees' caring responsibilities and we become actual human beings again – with messy lives that get in the way of the 24/7 'always on' culture. This could be a positive thing to help us out of the reifying structures of employment.

PMR: How do you feel our experiences of Covid-19 measure against the depiction of plagues and other disasters in fiction and film? Brian Aldiss famously accused John Wyndham of writing ‘cosy catastrophes’. Has Covid-19 been a ‘cosy catastrophe’, with people dutifully queuing for food? Or is there something fundamentally distasteful referring to any catastrophe as ‘cosy’?

JC: There’s a phenomenon in plague literature, when a lot of people die from an infectious outbreak (whether a disease or zombies, although it is a feature of natural disaster movies to some extent too), which is that we get a lot of smaller stories. I called them ‘episodemics’ in *Legacies of Plague* to capture how writers create lots of ‘episodes’ during the epidemic. These are usually small vignettes where we are introduced to a character, family, or group, and follow their story for a while, until they die. But our experience of Covid-19 doesn’t have this omniscient perspective. Instead, we are atomised into individual households. We might be able to read of these other experiences in the news or on social media or hear them from friends, but then they are part of different genres, the media’s ‘personal story’ genre or the anecdote, and they don’t cohere into a pattern or a selection that exemplifies a point a writer is trying to capture (such as, ‘even the most careful get infected’ or ‘a strong belief in your right to individual freedom is not a prophylactic’). I don’t think what we are experiencing is cosy, though: it certainly isn’t in my borough, Newham, which has the highest death rate in the UK amid one of the most diverse populations.

GC: Living through this now I’ve been surprised by how few writers predicted the *dullness* of this modality of pandemic. While I remember vividly the Captain Tripps section of *The Stand,* which sees global society effectively collapse entirely over the course of a few weeks, this transformation has been so much quieter, weirdly calmer. The text I keep thinking about is actually Asimov’s Spacer novels, which saw small numbers of people colonizing extrasolar planets on vast estates that turned them intensely agoraphobic, as they interacted only with screens and robotic servants. On the rare days when I have an in-person interaction with someone outside my household it comes as almost a shock – and it hasn’t been that long.

CE: I found myself thinking, back in about early March, that what we were living through are the one or two paragraphs you get in pandemic and catastrophe narratives like Wyndham’s *Day of the Triffids* or Ballard’s *The Drought* where months – or years – pass between the initial signs of the catastrophe and the present narrative time of spectacular survivalism. That the odd combination of terror and boredom Covid-19 seemed to be introducing, in which an entire way of life had fundamentally changed seemingly overnight (although, of course, we have been living with various crises for some time now in terms of austerity, surging inequality, climate crisis, and so on), was matched by the daily grind of

lockdown and actively attempting to do nothing - outside at least. And that this is the bit novelists usually miss in favour of proleptic jumps into the future when things *really* start to happen and you get looting, everyone scrambling to leave the city, and the gradual embrace of survivalist, often bizarre new cultures (think of *Mad Max*, or Ballard's mad Jungian figures in the desiccated desertscape of *The Drought*).

PMR: I often feel like I've wandered out of Russell T. Davies's *Years and Years*, bounced from one disaster to another. Do you think that our reading of apocalypses in science fiction and other genres prepares us for apocalypses in the real world?

JC: I felt a kind of deadly calm acceptance at the start of the pandemic, an uncanny sense of familiarity. I'd soaked myself in plague literature and accounts of infectious diseases and pandemics for years. I knew what would happen, in what order, and I expected it to unfold as it did. While a lot of friends and family were panicked and surprised by different measures as they were rolled out, I was not. There is a pattern to pandemics that is reflected in most plague literature.

I think we have ahead of us a moment not sufficiently covered by plague literature because, by necessity, literary stories end. Often, in the case of plague literature or infectious disease films, the threat recedes or, in miraculous time to save the lead actor, a vaccine is found. Even a bleak ending, like in McCarthy's *The Road,* is an ending. But it is not clear that a vaccine will be found for Covid-19 and it certainly won't be developed and widely administered before the end of 2020, from all accounts. Ahead of us, therefore, we will have to learn to live completely differently, with fear of infection as a daily present, with different routines and practices in all areas of our lives, from the public to the private. Our consumption practices will alter. Our socialising will change. Our workplaces, our travel, our spending will change. The divisions of life into work, leisure time, holidays, 'a night in': all these are already crumbling and will not, I think, be restored quickly to their usual patterns. The university sector in the UK is predicting that 30% of university jobs will be lost. Many of us with previously stable jobs will find themselves without employment. As Gerry says, we will have to live with the global economic consequences of lockdowns. This is scary and, to some extent, hard to comprehend since it affects every area of our life. Most plague literature also deals primarily with the plague, whereas we are also living through an extraordinary time of effective protests that have swept the world in the wake of the killing of George Floyd by a police officer in the United States. Statues are falling, US cities are committing to changing or even abolishing their police forces. So the pandemic has also become the backdrop for a long overdue time of reckoning between citizens and their states over the treatment of black people.

GC: It doesn't seem to me that fictional apocalypses train us that well for thinking through real disasters. Our narratives always involve acts of intense violence, with small, tight-knit, deeply paranoid groups having to make 'tough choices' about exclusion and murder, whereas real disasters are typically characterised by moments of solidarity, self-sacrifice, and mutual care. If we think about the Covid-19 lockdowns we have seen essentially everyone in society transform the coordinates of their lives overnight to protect those at risk and limit the spread of the disease; it was the political leadership of the US and the UK that failed and perpetuated the disaster, not the citizenry, and it's that same political leadership that is now pushing us out of the lockdowns before we are ready.
CE: Oddly (appropriately?), I was reading Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* as Covid-19 was brewing 'elsewhere'. I remember learning the phrase 'social distancing' well before lockdown was even mentioned by the UK government, and told my union I wouldn't be travelling into Central London for our picket – opting to record my teach-out on 'The Coming Catastrophe' from my garden in Brighton. I agree with Jennifer that a familiarity with apocalyptic and disaster books and films certainly prepares us to an extent for the inevitable early stages of a global emergency – that's the 'uncanny familiarity'. I disagree that apocalyptic narratives haven't prepared us for what comes next – not all of them at least! Butler's *Parable* novels are notable for their mixing of the horrifying dystopian (far-right vigilante groups feeling empowered to destroy or enslave vulnerable communities, a pyromanic drug craze, gang rape, brutal murders, and so on) and the insistently utopian – even amid all the butchery, Lauren and her group demonstrate that human ties of trust, kindness, self-sacrifice and the long tough undertaking of rebuilding can occur.

Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* strikes me as another instructive novel, in this sense. As global sea levels rise and cities like New York become submerged and intertidal, capitalism accommodates itself to the new catastrophic situation generating aquatic markets for speculative finance. The apocalyptic flooding doesn't end capitalism and Robinson introduces us to a world of retro-fitting submerged buildings, figuring out ways to travel through the intertidal, and new forms of co-operative living and mutual aid. We can see some of these more hopeful, even utopian, things happening around us during Covid-19 with the rapid proliferation of mutual aid groups, local networks for providing food parcels to those who are vulnerable or self-shielding, and the simple offer of remote company for people living in isolation. I find this very hopeful, particularly after years of grinding austerity (and the prospect of gruelling economic hardship for years to come to pay for all this furloughing).
PMR: Okay, let me vary that question. What is the purpose, do you think, of reading or watching fictional catastrophes? Other than potentially preparing us for

something that might happen in the real world, do they serve any useful function? Or is that too instrumental a way of thinking about fictional apocalypses?

GC: It seems to me to be an attempt to perform what Richard Grusin calls *premediation,* to anticipate and rehearse what we think will happen (and maybe what in some sense we secretly long for). Perhaps I've already given up the game with my earlier answer but I don't know that these fictional catastrophes are training us all that well; the surreality and confusion I have felt during the Covid-19 epidemic hasn't been mollified in any way by years of watching zombie movies, and to the extent that those films have informed the way I've reacted to this situation it's been mostly by training me with the wrong structures of feeling (giving, for example, a run to the grocery store a weird charge of danger or threat). What we've seen in this epidemic is not people turning on each other but reorganizing huge elements of our society, on the fly, in the name of solidarity and collective caring; our leaders have proven wildly inadequate to the moment, but by and large ordinary people have risen to the occasion in ways our mainstream, mass market science fictions did not anticipate.

CE: For me, the answer is very simple. These narratives, to varying extents, allow us to inhabit the thought experiment of what life would be like outside of contemporary capitalism. Whether they depict that world as cannibalistically barbaric (I'm thinking here of narratives like the BBC TV series *Threads* or Julie Myerson's really disturbing *Then*) or tentatively pastoral and escapist (Richard Jeffries' *After London*, Wyndham's *Day of the Triffids*, Leigh Brackett's *The Long Tomorrow*, Jim Crace's viral pandemic *The Pesthouse*) depends on the author's politics and the historical moment in which they are written, and to which they respond and creatively remediate. Their function is incredibly important, I think, in allowing readers to occupy these speculative worlds and imagine how things might be different and just how historically contingent our contemporary world of capitalist modernity really is, once you view it from the perspective of a different timescale.

JC: I think it largely depends on the quality of the fictional apocalypse, its ability, as Caroline says, to make us think and feel differently about how the world and our societies could be configured. A lot of mainstream catastrophe movies are focused on reassuring us that the world can and will eventually return to normal. Even texts that are interested in exploring different configurations of society often still want to reassure us as to the universality of human structures of feeling.

PMR: And to finesse that question again. Are science fiction fans, let alone science fiction academics or scholars of apocalypse, any better prepared at facing real-world disasters? I'm wary of perpetuating the sense of exceptionalism that has often been ascribed to fans, 'all fans are Slans', etc. But can people outside the sf community learn anything from how fans organise and collaborate? For

example, I read a great story from New York of how cos-players were using their design skills to make facemasks for health workers.

GC: One way I hope we are, if we are, it's in being more suspicious of the pre-packaged narratives of threat and blame that rapidly emerge from official sources in these situations. Having role-played the apocalypse so many times, in so many different ways, it would be nice to think that might be a bit more resistant to efforts to propagandize the virus; perhaps we might have a better sense of the many different sorts of stories that might be told (and by who, and to what ends). I'm not sure I believe that, but it would be nice if it were true.

PMR: In one sense, Covid-19 feels like it's been a very rapid disease, from its initial outbreak in December through to the horrific death tolls in April. But, in another sense, it feels like it's been a very slow disease because we've had repeated warnings over the last twenty years that not only could something like Covid-19 happen, it also *would*. Viewed that way, Covid-19 seems to describe what Timothy Morton calls a 'hyperobject'. If so, how do you think Covid-19 changes our sense of time and place, now that days seem to stretch into the distance?

CE: I couldn't agree more. We've been living in a crisis for a long time now, with the feeling that things can't be stretched any further. I'm really struck by Kathryn Yusoff's idea of the 'black Anthropocene', which builds on work in black and indigenous studies to critique the inescapable whiteness of geology as the discipline that gave us the geological epoch of the Anthropocene. Yusoff makes the point, and this is something N.K. Jemisin also talks about, that for African Americans *the apocalypse has already happened*; it's been happening for a long time. We might even say that the idea of sf apocalypse as a sudden, spectacular event is the product of a white imaginary that has been shielded from many catastrophe experiences. Take, for example, the idea of environmental racism, which relates to the black Anthropocene. African American communities have been living in apocalyptic conditions – with polluted water sources (Flint, Michigan, anyone?), carcinogenic environments (think of Cancer Alley along the Mississippi), vulnerable to climate disasters like Hurricane Katrina, which devastated black communities in New Orleans. In fact, Jemisin wrote a short story about this in her 2018 collection, *How Long `Til Black Future Month?*

As to the hyperobject, I think recent studies like Yusoff's remind us of the entanglement between humans and nonhuman entities, the almost unfathomable networks of exchange that connect us with animal, organic and inorganic life forms and materials, as well as the fetishized objects of our own labour that circulate globally and render unthinkable the processes of human living labour (as well as what Marxists call 'dead' labour, that is machinery and automation, as well as capital investment in such things). Marx famously described dead labour as 'vampire-like' in the way it sucked the life out of the

living labour (labouring humans), and it's perhaps no surprise that this is taken up by object-oriented ontologists and theorists of actor-network theory, who are interested in Marx's consideration of the non-human labour that interacts with living human labour in the production of commodities.

GC: Another hyperobject-like quality of coronavirus is the way it seems to defy our ability to learn about it and prepare accordingly. When I think back on many of the facts we were told in February, even just looking back from the perspective of June, it is startling just how hard it has been to get a handle on the true transmission patterns and risks of the violence – and we are now confounded by months of reporting from both governmental and scientific actors that has turned out to be significantly incorrect, as well as misreported, but still circulates on social media and in folk epidemiology as if it were accurate knowledge. Add to this the bizarre political polarization in the US that has, for several months, treated the virus as a partisan issue subject to cable-news debate, and the project of simply educating ourselves and informing the public about the virus has proven extremely challenging.

JC: Because the disease has caused the inequalities in our societies to be thrown into even sharper relief, as we see, for example, with the disproportionately higher death toll among ethnic minorities, with the fact that in so many countries care home residents were forgotten about until it was too late, and with women having tended to shoulder the burden of home-schooling, at the expense of their jobs and careers and, of course, their mental and physical health, there is a sense of urgency demanding we tackle these problems, properly this time, not simply in a reformist manner. We have seen this energy manifest in the Black Lives Matter protests and there is wider public sympathy with the protesters and their actions than I think we have seen before. People I would not expect to support the demolition of statues do so, for instance: they understand why it is offensive and are more comfortable jettisoning 'the way things were' than in pre-pandemic times, I think. It feels almost claustrophobically urgent to rethink and restructure our societies along fair lines that prioritise care over profit, and I think the despair that will result if we return to the normal structures of inequality will be crushing.

PMR: Related to that question is perhaps also a question of technology. Two months ago I'd never heard of Zoom or Microsoft Teams, now they seem to have become central to my working life. Equally, I've been thinking about 'social distance sf' where characters interact only through technology. So, how do you think the pandemic is changing – or could change – our relationship to technology?

CE: Yes, I've been thinking a lot about Vashti in Forster's 'The Machine Stops'. I feel like a swaddled lump of flesh, with a face as white as a fungus at the moment. Nobody told me we'd be *eating so many biscuits* in the apocalyptic

pandemic! I'm fascinated by the way in which technology will change our teaching practices in high education for a long time to come – as Jennifer says, we're going to be teaching online, or in some blended form, for many months and possibly years to come. It feels as if every university has had to reimagine itself as the Open University, virtually overnight. I like the idea of social distancing sf. Another (comedic) example would be that Mitchell and Webb 'Remain Indoors' sketch about an apocalyptic quiz show, which feels rather close to home now. But I was also thinking about Laura Mixon's cyberpunk novel *Glass Houses*, in which the protagonist Ruby prefers going outside using her homemade robot-avatars or 'waldos'. Ruby's agoraphobia enables this fascinating inter-subjectivity with her waldos (which mixes human and nonhuman, as well as blurring genders into a kind of assemblage subjectivity – shout-out here to my PhD student Sasha Myerson who is writing about this), but also imagines a world in which climate change has led to outdoors being so dangerous that only the very rich can afford the protective clothing necessary to enable people to leave the house.

GC: It will be interesting to see what elements of the lockdown become permanent, whether by consumer choice or by austerity-driven decisions of institutional leaders. Many people have expressed satisfaction with working from home, for instance, and a large number of corporations have identified this as an attractive play to cut real estate and HR expenses (as well as shift some fixed costs like electricity, plumbing, and technology directly to employees); this may be recognized a major legacy of the crisis, and will in turn have major implications for the way cities generate revenue and maintain infrastructure. Other elements may not be so long lasting – it seems that the experiments with remote learning have had the effect of convincing both students and instructors of the value of in-person instruction, and may set the stage for conflict between them and administrations who still see online instruction as a means to cut costs and weaken labour power.

JC: I agree that online learning and teaching has not been the success that the developers of platforms to facilitate it imagined. I am concerned – as ever – that this enforced experiment and the conditions of life after lockdown will mean that face to face teaching will become part of an elite offering, from universities that have the space and finances to provide such a learning environment. There have been advantages, however, to online activities. Since Easter, I have been running a weekly research seminar for our faculty (which I've wryly called #PlagueTimePapers). We keep it to an hour and it is among ourselves, at this stage, and has proved far more popular than if we held the event in person, with over double or triple the numbers tuning in, both of faculty and graduate students. For faculty, it has the advantage of being only an hour, and

is less disruptive to one's day than a trip to campus. We also all want to hear about each other's research: it has almost felt luxurious to do so for nearly ten weeks now. For graduate students, they do not even need to turn their video on, so there's no pressure to be 'seen', to feel they should ask a question. At my institution, many of the more unwieldy university meetings (whole School/ faculty meetings with a lot of people where information is primarily 'cascaded' rather than discussed) have been cancelled. I think this is in part because the technology highlights starkly that these meetings were only ever a performance of leadership visibility rather than any real consolidation of an intellectual community or School unity. I think that's a fantastic by-product of the moment. If we can convince our management of what we have all known for a long time – we will be happier and have more time for teaching and research with fewer meetings in our lives and more productive meetings for those we have to have – then that would be a substantial post-pandemic gain.

PMR: Whether it's Bill Masen in *The Day of the Triffids*, or the protagonists of films like *The Day the Earth Caught Fire*, *The Quiet Earth*, *Open Your Eyes* or *28 Days Later*, there's always that great moment when the characters stumble through streets that have been left barren and desolate. But, on this occasion, streets are desolate because we've had to stay inside and limit our physical contact. So, do you think writers of 'inner space' like J.G. Ballard are better guides to our current condition? (Not that I'm necessarily recommending cannibalism as a solution!)

CE: It's a weird coincidence that I've been writing a couple of lectures on Ballard during lockdown and thinking about inner space. But also Doris Lessing's *Memoirs of a Survivor* where the narrator can't leave her flat and sort of morphs into the walls, behind which she discovers this other dimension. What I find fascinating about this more experimental kind of psychological sf is that I think it genuinely attempts to think through how our entire ontology would be altered after some apocalyptic event fundamentally changes society. Ballard's 1960s ecocatastrophe novels (*The Wind From Nowhere*, *The Drowned World*, *The Drought* and *The Crystal World*), and even his concrete trilogy in *Crash*, *Concrete Island* and *High Rise*, stand out for their surreal characters – it's hard to think of another writer who captures the sheer bat-shit possibility of deranged individuals living in a world without rules who gradually acquiesce to their most regressive instincts (except, perhaps, a character like Baron Harkonnen in Frank Herbert's *Dune*; David Lynch's 1984 film adaptation really captures this). It's the combination of speculative world-building with surrealist influences (Ballard's novels are full of visual intertexts by painters like Dalí and Paul Delvaux) but also the extrapolation of what human nature might look like outside of civilized society.

PMR: To take that line of inquiry further, could this be an opportunity to explore more deeply what we mean by questions of intimacy, of affect, of almost something like telepathy – touching at a distance? Do science fiction or other forms of literary apocalypse give us pointers as to how we might reimagine such borders?

GC: I think perhaps coronavirus helps us recognize some of those structures as fantasies more clearly: the idea that communication can be simply disembodied by telepathic or digital mediation has been disproven in an extremely visceral, felt way. We are social creatures and we need close, physical with other people to function – not just touch but also just the comforts and cues one gets from just being near other humans. The push towards virtuality and digitality in all things has, I hope, hit a significant roadblock now that we've seen just how impoverished our interactions are under these conditions of mandatory solitude.

PMR: Although I care for someone with physical disabilities, I think so far I've had a fortunate lockdown experience. But, over and above the social isolation and physical confinement, there's also been increasing instances of domestic violence and mental health concerns. Although the austerity mantra, 'we're all in this together', has been rehashed for Covid-19, you are more likely to be affected disproportionately if you are from an ethnic minority or working-class background. Without trivialising such realities, do you think apocalyptic fiction speaks to these issues of class, race, disability and gender?

GC: I would certainly hope that science fiction – especially given the intersectional and anti-imperial turns the genre has made in the last couple of decades – has helped its fans to recognize how unevenly the threat of Covid-19 has been spread, and to appreciate that there is no cosmic or moral logic to the impacts the disease has had on different populations. If the apocalypse is a 'revelation' of truths we ordinarily cannot see, Covid-19 certainly seems to qualify, showing us in quite stark terms what sort of work and what sort of workers are deemed 'essential'/disposable. But science fiction is a multi-headed monster: for every radically leftist work of transformative belonging there is a eugenic nightmare justifying social violence as if it were a force of nature, and we are certainly seeing elements of that in new calls in the US and the UK to simply let the virus take its course. I also have some anxiety that science fiction has trained people to narrativize the virus in teleological ways that are counterproductive, especially with respect to the constant appeals to 'until a vaccine is found'. I am optimistic that a vaccine or effective treatment will be found, but there are no guarantees this is true; we have never produced a workable vaccine for a coronavirus before this, and while there are promising avenues of research there are also indications that we might actually never be unable to permanently

vaccinate against Covid-19 and its successors. One of the worst parts of living through this moment in history is having no idea which sort of story we are actually in.

PMR: In the years leading up to our present crisis, there was a huge spate of apocalyptic fictions. From zombie apocalypses like *The Walking Dead* to climate change novels, like Kim Stanley Robinson's *Green Earth*, and pandemics such as Steven Soderbergh's *Contagion*. The 'sense of an ending', as Frank Kermode once called it, is integral to hosts of world religions and mythologies, from The Book of Revelations to Ragnarok. But why do you think there has been this *current* fascination with the apocalyptic?

GC: I gestured towards this above, but it seems to me that we are dealing with a cultural force that is simultaneously diagnosis and desire. We know capitalism is cruel, we know it is unfair, and we know it is unsustainable – we know this can't go on forever and on some level most of us don't want it to. So we are looking for something to tell us what to expect next, and to find narratives that can convince us that the radical transformation of the coordinates of our lives might not be so bad.

JC: Cultural objects are often made by people who have not lived at the cruellest end of capitalist inequality. I think there has been during my lifetime a recognition by the middle-classes in the West that we have largely benefited from capitalism. This was starting to loosen, with millennials saddled with huge debt for their educations, shut out of the housing market, and thrown into a far more precariously orientated workforce. But even their prospects were considerably better than many millions of others in the Global South. For makers of films and popular apocalypse books and series, I think there's been an underlying anxiety about these unequal benefits and, more recently, the damage we have done to the environment in the process and the unequal effects of that too. In the West, the narrative structures we love are still the old ones of comeuppance, of a sin that eventually attracts its punishment, still those of *Doctor Faustus*. It's there in so many films: the evil man is punished, the one who betrayed the group is eventually eaten by zombies himself, the woman who commits adultery is shamed and brought low. Some of our most celebrated and canonised literature rehashes these simple moral fantasies and apocalyptic films are not exempt. It is possible to see apocalyptic cultural objects as fantasies of punishment. They are made by wealthy people who know their wealth is, in some murky chain of consequences that they may not wish to examine in too much detail, reliant upon exploitation in the world elsewhere and they suspect that this might not be deserved or lasting.

PMR: So, do you think that fascination will continue *after* Covid-19? Or do you think we'll want a 'sense of a beginning', something more utopian perhaps?

GC: From my position in the States, we seem to be reaching a crisis point there: ordinary people are re-evaluating their lives and what they value, and are desperate to recover the elements of in-person connection they have lost, while the managerial and administrative bureaucracies are looking to make permanent some of the austere structures of Covid-19 (like widespread computer learning, and radically disconnected, interchangeable labourers) they have always supported but were only able to actually implement under the sign of emergency. So I anticipate some serious labour struggle over what the post-Covid future should actually look like.

Even since this conversation began we've seen very rapid transformation of the terms of social understanding in the US, with an unprecedented protest movement (bordering on the insurrectionary) opposing police violence emerging in the streets as a nearly dialectical reversal of our previous enforced isolation. We seem to be in a moment of tremendous possibility, of all kinds.

JC: I fear Gerry is right: as Naomi Klein's *Shock Doctrine* detailed, emergencies are often treated by governments as a time to introduce measures that would otherwise be unimaginable or so unpopular as to be unworkable. People in the UK were convinced to democratically endorse austerity after the 2007-8 financial crash. That hardly gives me hope for what lies ahead. Yet, at the same time, there's an upsurge of hope, especially with the speed, uncompromising ferocity, and extent of the Black Lives Matter protests. Even the mainstream media are starting to interview prison abolitionists, for example, and treat their positions seriously. That these kinds of arguments would be covered by news programmes on the BBC was almost unthinkable ten years ago. So I think there is a shift and it is not only on the streets, although the momentum is coming from there, from protesters, organisers, and campaigners. I have so much to say here – too much in fact! Like Gerry, I suspect there will be labour disputes in the near future and if there's widespread unemployment, then there is going to have to be considerable rethinking of the economy.

CE: I agree that this is a moment of 'tremendous possibility', as Gerry puts it. The toppling of the slave trader Edward Colston's statue in Bristol on 7th June, as part of the global protests against George Floyd's murder and the reignited Black Lives Matter movement, was a profoundly historical and symbolic moment. Just watching it back hours later on social media and in the UK news, I felt that thrill and that optimism that such symbolic turning points can provide. As Jennifer says, the energy of protest movements like BLM and Extinction Rebellion (XR) have made certain kinds of conversations possible even in the most conservative of discursive spaces. The months and years ahead are going to be unimaginably hard I think – unemployment will clearly rise which was already on the cards given rising automation and its technological displacement. Of course,

people don't let go of the status quo without a bloody fight, but I just don't see how we can all go on without some kind of fundamental break with neoliberal hegemony. Since the Global Financial Crisis in 2008, since the massive cycle of occupations and protests in 2011 (and not forgetting the tumultuous student anti-tuition fees marches of Winter 2010 in the UK), and the more recent XR direct action, it's become clear that 'business as usual' is not an option. We now see an entire youth movement and a generation of schoolchildren who have grown up during these years and for whom the political choice is much clearer, more stark: it's an existential question of planetary survival. So yes, I am hopeful that something more utopian can emerge out of the wreckage. Two great hostile camps directly face each other – *socialisme ou barbarie*. When the complexity of social and class struggle crystallises in this way, some kind of political change will wrestle itself into being.

PMR: So, here's the one I've been building up to. With Covid-19, can we finally lay to rest the Jameson and Zizek misquote, 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism'? Without necessarily getting political (unless you want to!), can we use science fiction to imagine a time beyond our current disaster capitalism? I'm thinking particularly of more ecologically minded fictions.

GC: I don't know! It seems like we are seeing the truth of that quote confirmed in a way: we have seen the entire economy fly over a cliff, both with respect to global supply chains and with respect to small local businesses, with completely unprecedented, genuinely massive unemployment likely to extend into years or more, and there has been almost no response from the powers that be. The US Congress has been out of session for weeks; the stock market has recovered back to its highs; all the effusive early talk of universal basic income and government payroll protection seems to have died on the vine. If Covid-19 can't make us think in a different way about the relationship between capitalism and human thriving, what could? On the other hand, at the same time, as mentioned above, those conversations are happening at street level, with the current Black Lives Matter protests and their calls for systemic change proving extremely popular, not just on the left but across the entire population, at least as of this writing. So perhaps we're still on the knife's edge, and could go either way.

CE: I've already addressed this above, but what fascinates me at the moment is how we might adopt the *longue durée* of nonhuman timescales to really put this question into perspective. H.G. Wells does it in the far distant future of *The Time Machine*, when all we see is a lurid shoreline of giant crustaceans scuttling about. And Richard Maguire does it in stunning graphic form in *Here*. I've been teaching Nikolaus Geyrhalter's 2016 documentary *Homo Sapiens* recently, and

this might be the most controversial example of all – a film that imagines the world without us, after humanity's mysterious extinction, in which the cinematic perspective is weirdly utopian and the experience of watching the film seems oddly calming. With its birdsong, buzzing bees, and gently swaying grasses in the winds, watching a film that anticipates the rewilded, ruined world after humanity has perished is akin to doing a mindfulness exercise.

JC: It's easier to imagine the end of the world because organising against capitalism is extremely hard, exhausting work involving disappointment, arguments, and mistakes, and it does not necessarily provide a space where racism, misogyny, ableism and all the other forms of discrimination that blight us are left at the door. It's easier to imagine blowing it all up. Action films love this fantasy. The reality of challenging the status quo is more tiring and time-consuming. It's also risky. There's a reason why critical theory is so adept at criticising its present and so reticent about what should replace it: there's no absolute guarantee that a fairer society will make us collectively happier. Quite a number of people are invested in and highly attached to forms of capitalism that do not serve them well, after all. It is a familiar habitas. Sf, as Caroline says, at least is a genre that tries to think through some of the problems of future change.

PMR: And to wrap up, an obligatory question perhaps. Is there *one* fictional apocalypse, perhaps a pandemic but not necessarily so, which you would recommend people to read or watch? And why?

GC: It's hard to imagine recommending anyone but Octavia Butler in this moment: she seems to have seen the real future coming in a way few others did, as well as opened up alternative possibilities and utopian lines of flights that can still inspire us. The Parable books are almost thirty years old, but somehow seem like they're given us the news from six months from now; they seem even more prophetic now than they did at the time. For something less grim, I would recommend Kim Stanley Robinson's recent fictions like *Aurora, New York 2140,* and the upcoming *Ministry for the Future,* all of which revolve in different ways about finding the seeds of utopian possibility in the ruins of catastrophe and collapse.

JC: I agree with Octavia Butler. Given what is happening right now, we should all be reading people of colour's work, especially if we haven't been doing so much before. We need to be engaging with and most importantly listening to black and ethnic minority activists, friends, colleagues, academics, and campaigners, centring their voices, attending to their writing (of all types, not just sf and pandemic fiction), and trying to change for the better the places where we work and live to make them spaces where everyone feels and, indeed, is valued equally.

CE: Ditto. And there's a new graphic novelisation of *Parable of the Sower* by Damian Duffy and John Jennings to reignite your interest in Butler's prophetic narrative. It's not just the disaster of capitalist inequality and climate change that Butler captures, it's the unerringly grim imagination of what a populist resurgence of white supremacy might look like, with self-appointed, gun-toting militias taking it upon themselves to police the streets and kill black Americans. Think it can't happen here? It already is.

PMR: And on that note, thank you.