

BOOK REVIEW:

UTOPIAN AND DYSTOPIAN EXPLORATIONS OF PANDEMICS AND ECOLOGICAL BREAKDOWN: ENTANGLED FUTURITIES¹

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In *Utopian and Dystopian Explorations of Pandemics and Ecological Breakdown: Entangled Futures*, published in 2025, Heather Alberro and her fellow editors have put together a timely and intellectually rich anthology which considers how disasters of pandemics and ecological collapse shift our ways of thinking about the future (Alberro et al.). The volume posits itself at the intersection of environmental humanities, speculative fiction studies, and political ecology. It maintains that pandemic narratives are never just about disease, and climate narratives are never just about ecological devastation, but rather that both recurring tropes are cultural sites where anxieties about survival, futurity, and collective belonging are worked out. Instead of conceptualizing utopia and dystopia as endpoints in opposition to one another, the collection articulates that both modes often co-exist within the same cultural texts, creating what the editors call “entangled futures,”² or visions of the future which are never unitary, but rather contested, overlapping, and unevenly situated across lives and ecologies.

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² “Entangled futures” refers to the interconnected and overlapping visions of the future like utopian, dystopian, ecological, and social that shape and complicate our responses to global crises like pandemics and environmental collapse.

A central, early cited point made by the editors in the volume is that “we make environments, and they make us” (Alberro et al. 2). A simple remark which complicates human-centered understandings of crisis and refocuses attention on the entangled relations, which are often unequal, between bodies and the worlds in which they exist. They reject the myth that our lives take place outside ecological processes by observing disaster from a safe distance, asserting that humans are simultaneously players and victims of the disordered planet that humans engage with, while also being shaped by the systems humans disrupt.

This statement is consistent with what scholars working on environmental justice and crisis temporality have theorized. In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), Rob Nixon asserts that ecological catastrophe does not always appear in the form of a sudden disaster; it can also appear as a slow but accumulative force, “a violence not spectacular nor instant, rather incremental and accretive” (Nixon 2), impinging first on marginalized populations. In a similar manner, Nixon’s idea of slow violence dovetails with his interest in the slow, systemic abandonment of some lives in pandemic narratives particularly in those where care, protection, and medical infrastructure are distributed unequally. Likewise, in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), Donna Haraway argues for the importance of thinking with other species, infrastructures, and environments, as opposed to myriad narratives of human exceptionalism, in favor of what she calls *sympoiesis*; that is, “making with” others in circumstances of shared vulnerability.

In this sense, *Entangled Futurities* does not simply document a dystopian collapse or utopian hope; it intervenes in a wider critical conversation by asking us to question for whom the world comes to an end and for whom it persists, and under what conditions imagination itself can be considered a means of survival. The volume does not gather catastrophe under a singular ‘event,’ but instead directs our attention toward pandemics and ecological collapse as ongoing processes of world-making and world-unmaking which are most often felt first, and most intensely, by communities that have historically been relegated to the edge of futurity. In this way, the book simultaneously joins a wider decolonial, eco-critical project of re-framing crisis not as a leap away from normality but as the structural logic of a world built on uneven endurance, by which some bodies are sheltered by futurity and others inhabit a permanent state of precarity.

To properly situate how the volume develops its central arguments, it is useful, as the editor’s note suggests, to outline the organization of the book. *Utopian and Dystopian*

Explorations of Pandemics and Ecological Breakdown: Entangled Futurities is divided into four parts which explore different political and theoretical dimensions of crisis narratives and future-making.

The first part of the book looks at contagion, mutation, and bodily excess, as they are central to social imaginings of threat from ecology and pandemics. Rather than seeing the monstrous only as a metaphor, the authors argue that the monstrous is socially produced in bodies that disrupt health, productivity, and futurity. Texts such as *Wilder Girls* are read as biopolitical allegories in which the infected body acts as both a site of fear and, therefore, a potential site of transformation. Ultimately, the book encourages thinking of crisis as both a site of futural vulnerability and futural imaginative possibility.

The second part of the book, “Intersectional Critique,” turns from the monstrous body to the structural conditions that produce vulnerability. Highlighting that, as Butler observes, “Without grievability, there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life” (Butler 15). In focusing on systemic inequities, this volume illustrates that pandemics and ecological breakdowns are always coupled with histories of exploitation, colonialism, and marginalization. At this stage, intersectionality serves as an ethical corrective to a level of analysis and comprehension, where we question the notion of a universal “shared” catastrophe. Here, we begin to recognize that even the act of storytelling is a working force as we co-construct what the parameters of futurity might look like.

The third part of the book, “More-Than-Human Mutual Aid and Eco-Justice,” can be interpreted as extending ethical position to the nonhuman world. In this analysis, the narratives of mutual aid are understood as going beyond immediate crisis to suggest a form of ecological politics, developing forms of relationality that value mutual precarity and the value of nonhuman life. Survival is framed not simply as competition, but as relational, developing care, reciprocity, and responsibility for interconnected human life and ecology. Crisis emerges not only to resist social or ecological harms, but to promote ethical imagination and the redefinition of social and ecological responsibilities, as seen in situations where human vulnerability is exacerbated by environmental precarity and political action, for example, migrants left “in sub-zero temperatures in a swampy area, in the Bialowieza Forest” (Alberro et al. 166).

Finally, the fourth part, “Creative Resistance and Utopian Glimmers,” explores the concepts of imagination and creativity as essential forms of resistance. Utopia is

imagined not as an idealized end state but as encounters with the enduring “shimmer” of life described by Deborah Rose Bird, which persists even amid ecological destruction and late-capitalist extractivism, offering the potential to inspire more attentive, caring, and creative relations with human and multispecies communities (Alberro et al. 18). While dystopic conditions outlined throughout this chapter describe scenarios of scarcity and uncertainty, there are also small acts of resistance, aesthetic interruption, and imagination which can keep open spaces for alternative futures. Through all four parts, the volume operates with the understanding that crises are also spaces for the analytical, ethical, and imaginative inquiry: they critique power, experience relational care, and foster practices of the imaginative that make unthinkable futures thinkable.

Across these four sections, the volume does not simply document narratives of collapse; it traces how crisis becomes a terrain of political struggle, where the meaning of monstrosity, care, justice, and imagination is continuously renegotiated. The book’s form becomes part of the book’s argument: that thinking about pandemics and ecological breakdown means thinking about who is entitled to imagine a future and under what conditions they may be allowed to do so.

Additionally, the text outlines seven significant modalities in which speculative texts convey meaning, stimulate imagination, and engage an ethical responsibility: (1) narrative construction, or the imaginative arrangement of fictitious or fictive worlds;³ (2) imaginative world-making, or the performance of place to endorse relational/ ecological ethics; (3) poetic and aesthetic representation, or decentering language and meaning through rhythm, imagery, and picturizations and complexities of language; (4) persuasive argumentation, or the formulation of ideas that change current forms of thinking and seeing; (5) didactics exposition, or the communication of intricate and private ideas and critiques of society; (6) dialogue, or the reciprocal acts of listening and interacting between characters, communities, and issues; and (7) critical action, or laboring with ethical, social, or ecological contrasts in ways that will unsettle accepted fictional narratives. Each of these modalities will fashion a different form for constructing, conveying, and arguing meaning while also contributing to the development of attention, ethical consideration, and imaginative engagements.

³ The terms fictitious and fictive refer to imagined or invented elements, with fictitious emphasizing something made up or not real, and fictive highlighting its role in narrative, representation, or conceptual thinking.

By extension, the volume shows that speculative narratives like the art of speech are never ethically neutral. The imaginative and aesthetic activities of narrative, world-building, poetics, persuasion, pedagogy, dialogue, and critic discussed throughout Parts I to IV all entail both risk and possibility for transformation. Can these modalities make visible the experiences of the marginalized, encourage responsibility to ecology and society, and attend to the boundaries of ethical imagination? These practices are also politically ambiguous and can therefore work to reinforce the existing social hierarchy, naturalize suffering, or even conceal injustices. To take one example representing ecological collapse or pandemic crises as a form of abstract catastrophe that neglects the uneven distribution of vulnerability, risks reproducing an external and foreordained trajectory of events which erases the futures of those who are at high risk. The act of imagination always happens within or in relation to political and ethical responsibility: what it imagines, how it frames or reframes, and who is centered or silenced in the imagining all have material implications for collective sensibility and action.

The authors highlight that managing these modalities in an ethical manner is central to speculative storytelling. Just as historical examples of rhetorical practice showed that language can be co-opted as a weapon to help in acts of domination or oppression, worlds of the imagination can also be co-opted to fight against and reduce oppression and injustice, or co-opted to enable and perpetuate systemic injustice. As such, speculative literature, through its awareness-raising approach, requires and encourages others to exercise careful attention when creating and shaping narratives. In world-building, stylistic choices, and imaginative practices should be guided by ethical reflection and grounded in attentive, embodied, and relational care. By foregrounding relationality, multispecies solidarity, and imaginative resistance, this book tries to uphold storytelling as a vital and responsible act, structuring not just the possibilities of those futures we may want to inhabit, but also changing whose futures we make visible, value, and protect.

In addition, the volume demonstrates that these creative modes are interdependent and interconnected. Narrative building gains impetus in ethical concern and ethical considerations; poetic and aesthetic experimentation increases modes of relation in understanding; dialogue and critical intervention provide a space for reflective and non-reflective dissension; and/or persuasive or instructive approaches that foster awareness of social and ecological responsibility. The seven modes work together as critical and

creative tools to develop a participatory and ethically engaged form of creative practice. In this sense, the volume posits speculative literature as creative, ethical, and political: it is a site of engagement in the act of imagining beyond a purely intellectual exercise, engaging directly with the world and particularly with how we see and act in crisis even in crises of perception also revealing the stakes of imagining who is allowed to survive, thrive, and dream in an uncertain and fragile world.

As such, *Utopian and Dystopian Explorations of Pandemics and Ecological Breakdown: Entangled Futurities* does not simply collect speculative futures as an abstract thought experiment, but rather to prompt the reader to reimagine the conditions of potential meaningful futures. Through this it becomes evident in multiple ways that contemporary crises, metaphors of pandemic anxiety, ecological collapse, and technological acceleration have disrupted not only material infrastructures but have also entailed a corrosion of the symbolic infrastructures of storytelling through which communities render meaning to their place in geography. Discursive fragmentation, the social ascendance of algorithmically enhanced expression, and the delegitimization of shared vocabularies all express a deeper level of unwellness: the collapse of the speech commons; that delicate space between utterance, silence, and listening.

This is where the choice to foreground entanglement becomes meaningful. Entanglement, as is stated in the volume, is not a metaphor for connectedness, but a state in which agency and responsibility and vulnerability become a condition for distribution amongst human and more-than-human actors. To think within entanglement is to establish ethical awareness regarding how words resonate across networks of relationship that exceed human intention. As such, speech becomes relevant as a form of asserting authorship and more as a gesture of framed situated articulation; that is, of speaking *with* rather than *over*.

Many essays in the book take this seriously by testing and enacting narrative modes of closure. They do not offer solutions or diagnoses. Instead, they create a liminal space we might simply call anticipatory silence: a discursive position aware of the constraints of representation but nonetheless insistent on the obligation to imagine otherwise. This discursive spacing is evocative of Dauenhauer's notions of silence as an active structuring force; that is, one that does not deflect from discourse but conditions its possibilities (1980). Read through this lens, the book operates as a subtle but considerable intervention, arguing that the task of imagining the future is not primarily to

develop new content but rather to reconceptualize the ethics of communication through which futurity can be articulated.

By discussing futurity in relation to speaking, silencing, and listening, *Entangled Futurities* constitutes a departure from more standard utopian/dystopian scholarship that typically oscillates between prophetic reprimand and visionary declaration. Rather, the volume signals a quieter, more attentive politics, mobilizing imagination not as escape, but as disciplined listening to what is already emerging at the edges of the crisis. The volume does not offer solace. It offers something more urgent: an invitation to speak and listen differently, allowing silence and meaning to take their own weight as part of the communicative ecology that any future worth inhabiting will require.

Utopian and Dystopian Explorations of Pandemics and Ecological Breakdown: Entangled Futurities will be of special interest to scholars and practitioners interested in the ethical dimensions of world-making through narrative, theory, and artistic intervention. The interdisciplinary collection of voices will also be of substantial interest for researchers in ecocriticism, speculative fiction studies, political ecology, and critical humanities pedagogy. The collection not only diagnoses crisis, but it also interrogates the discursive regimes that allow the concept of “crisis” to be narrativized, or, at times, render it impossible to narrativize.

The editors’ avoidance of providing a specific conceptual framework may circulate some dissatisfaction among readers looking for a definitive theoretical anchor. Nevertheless, we can also read this openness as a methodological position: an intentional resistance to totalizing narratives at a time when we are already overburdened by ideological certainties. The volume does not indicate a clearly defined path forward; rather, it creates a space where uncertainty does not signal a failure of thought but is a necessary condition for ethical imagination. The piece is challenging and remarkably generative, it not only asks what futures are possible, but also how we talk about the future without simply replicating the same tired rhetorical habits that resulted in our current position.

At times, the text borders on idealism, especially when it expresses a certain hope that narrative reorientation can change deeply embedded socio-material realities. While it acknowledges the structural weight of extractive capitalism, colonial legacies, and automated economies of discourse, it does not always wholly tackle them in their material brutality. Nevertheless, the book’s strength lies not in offering potential solutions but

rather in developing a new attentiveness to the ethics of articulation under planetary duress.

All in all, *Entangled Futurities* is a critical and compelling endeavor within contemporary discussions of ecological imagination and speculative ethics. Some of the points that it makes could very well elicit contestation, but it is successful in articulating a critical interval where speech, silence, and futurity can be reconsidered in relation to one another. The book does not ask readers for their agreement; rather, it asks them to listen differently. And in a broken present, perhaps that may already be a radical act.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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