

Editorial Creative Writing and Arts

Contemporary Collapse: New Narratives of the End

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozona.2023.14.2.5266>



Living in an age of ecological collapse is daunting. Landscapes are undergoing large-scale alterations, biodiversity loss is increasing, environmental threats are omnipresent. It comes as no surprise that contemporary collapse, in its various manifestations, is ever more intensely present in our cultural imagination. While some ecological changes are abrupt and lead to calamitous destruction, such as the recent earthquake in Morocco, present times are also marked by invisibilized processes that are equally responsible for gradual ecological decline. Falling under the category of slow violence are, for instance, the manifold effects of factory farming, such as climate apartheid and global warming, and green capitalism, masked as a mitigating solution but in reality complicit in the exacerbation of production and consumption growth.

Within this tumultuous context, the arts may serve as a portal into new ways of reading the present apocalyptic fears beyond feelings of impotence and survivalist discourses. In fact, besides helping us confront the enormity of the global issues, they hold the potential to produce an epistemic shift in how we perceive the future. In fact, it is worth noting that collapse does not preclude recovery and restoration; decay and renewal indeed go hand in hand. Collapse may thus be elaborated beyond narratives of destruction, and more as a transition that gives birth to new, alternative states of being.

Echoing Ansgar Nünning's definition of narratives as "cultural ways of worldmaking," the contributions included in the creative writing and arts section expressly attempt to "generate possible worlds and exert performative power" that can wield an influence in contemporary society (194). Diana Lelonek's poignant cover image participates in this epistemic reframing by inviting us to acknowledge the vitality of never-ending life processes as well as the extent of the adaptability of living organisms to plasticized environments. The object portrayed in the cover image is part of an exhibit collected in the Center for the Living Things, a research para-institution founded in 2016 that examines, collects and popularizes the knowledge concerning new humanotic nature forms (Lelonek). As a symbol of petroculture, the

worn-out plastic bottle inevitably carries toxic legacies and traces of persistent environmental trauma. Yet, it is no longer a commodity. By blurring the line between the synthetic and the natural, its semiotic value is reinvented. The establishment of this intimate, hybrid relationship represents a lively refusal to subside to uselessness in exchange for new becomings.

In a similar vein, Nnenna Okore demonstrates the power of the arts to be itself regenerative, especially in a world consumed by human overproduction. Drawing on new materialism and African animist theories, Okore's artistic practice gives new life to discarded materials, rescuing them from ending up in capitalist wastelands, forgotten. By experimenting with waste and bioplastics, Okore creates fluctuating visual poems that closely resemble organic matter. In so doing, she establishes visionary ways of making kin. The intricate textures, the vibrant colors, and the mindful juxtaposition of light and shadow, all contribute to animating the static and to capturing the rhythms of life, thus expanding our understanding of impermanence. By shifting attention from *emergency* to *emergence*, waste "is no longer abject, rather it becomes precious objects deserving of care and meaning" (Okore). In Okore's creative practice, then, waste itself becomes a powerful storyteller that not only disrupts our idea of inescapable end, but also defeats widespread fatalistic nihilism.

With Yaxkin Melchy Ramos' poem, readers are encouraged to question the ethics of genetic engineering of more-than-human animals and to consider alternative multispecies futures to current exploitative systems disguised as progress, particularly in the context of food production. As the author explains in a footnote, the poem was written as "a strategy of poetic immersion for ecocritic/ecopoetic research." Inspired by a visit to the Tsukuba-Plant Innovation Research Center in 2021, the poem may be interpreted as a meta-reflection of this experience, which occurred during an interdisciplinary exchange dedicated to livestock and literature. The operations of the center, specialized on conducting agricultural research, are described in terms of capitalist efficiency in that the future of food is entrusted to robots and technological solutions. According to the poet, in this place, the severity of human effects on the planet is so evident that environmental awareness is amplified, actualizing the epistemological condition that Lynn Keller has named "self-conscious Anthropocene" (1-2).

The peak of moral questioning is reached only once the participants meet the hens used for biotechnology experiments. After discussing in group the cultural construction of animals in texts such as the Kojiki and the Genesis as a means to investigate our troubled relationship with domesticated animals, suddenly, the reality of ecological collapse becomes real: the participants are surrounded by rows of crowded cages, each one containing two hens laying eggs who are trapped in dark, tiny spaces "encrusted with dust and dirt." Each person in the group gets to hold a hen in their arms, to sense their body temperature, and to hear their "endless cries" fade away as their individuality emerges. Once they become entangled in such an emotional embrace, it is impossible to continue to ignore their pain. As the poem progresses through a series of questions imbued with Christological imagery and

Biblical references, Melchy forces his readers to pause, to pay attention, and to scrutinize the trajectory of our current actions.

José Manuel Marrero Henríquez carries on the inquiry into alternative modes of interspecies relationality with a short story from the series of newspaper columns entitled *Antiviral Writings*, which takes place in the intimacy of the home during the Covid-19 confinement. The author is known for developing the ecocritical theory called *The Poetics of Breathing*, which he defines as “a poetics that considers breathing a powerful metaphor concealing the rhythmic character of life that culture and nature share,” as he writes in his artist statement. In such aesthetic and ideological frame, *The House Pet* invites readers to breath along with nature against the anthropogenic currents that lead to the exhaustion of life, and to reflect on animal ownership and on species discrimination in order to instigate hope infused with tangible solutions for multispecies flourishing.

Stuart Cooke elaborates on these themes in his two poems *Helm* and *Fathom*, which elude fantasies of extinction by asking what kinds of relationships might we discover, or recover, by leaping beyond the species boundary and what kinds of languages would these relationships require. These questions permeate Cooke’s creative and scholarly writing, which includes a poetry collection, *Lyre* (UWAP, 2019), the translation into English of Gianni Siccardi’s *The Blackbird* (Vagabond Press, 2018) and the volume *Transcultural Ecocriticism* (Bloomsbury, 2021), of which he is co-editor. The two poems published in *Ecozon@* are both immersed in aquatic realms: the first, by dynamically alternating a darker and lighter text color, visually mimics a wave-induced motion, as if readers were peeking under the surface of water; the second, teems with whales and rivers, yet presents references to Australian wildfires, which offer a jarring elemental counterbalance. Within this context, the poet explores liminal spaces of interspecies encounters that urge to relocate the divine within emergent networks of relationality. Hence, with the decline of the Human, rather than upholding misanthropic principles, the idea of heaven turns from a human-centered abstraction to being “carved into mud” and made “of eggs and nests.”

In the attempt to examine ecological collapse beyond the human experience, it is necessary to also grasp the concept of deep time and to find ways to effectively translate this temporal scale into intelligible narratives. After all, “to live in the so-called Anthropocene is to think in geological time, recognizing that human activity now constitutes a major geologic force” (Vogelaar, Peat, Hale, 2). Both Laura op de Beke and Start Flynn tackle this very difficult task in their poems. In *Ticking Like a Mountain – or the Bezoszoic*, the peace and quiet of a mountain “somewhere in Western Texas,” on land owned by Jeff Bezos, is disrupted by the construction of the Clock of the Long Now, a monumental scale mechanical clock designed to keep time for ten millennia. The “throbbing pain” provoked by the persistent ticking noise, “and in time, a car park and a gift shop,” awakens long gone memories of past landscape configurations. Even if the mountain must endure yet another man-made trauma, she will survive this too.

In *15,000 Metres Above Time*, the poet tries to capture the eerie sense of time stopping inside the eye of a cyclone, when everything is still, but it is still possible to sense the menace about to erupt. The poet, who has experienced firsthand the devastating force of Australian cyclones, recognizes the struggle for survival of those more directly and immediately impacted by the effects of climate change. However, he also subtly recognizes the intrinsic ability of natural systems to adapt and even transform themselves. After all, the end itself is a slippery concept, especially when guided by anthropocentric beliefs that lead us to believing that the end of the human species implies also the end of the vegetal and animal worlds, that is the end of Earth. Yet, as Guido Morselli writes in his postapocalyptic novel *Dissipatio H.G.*, “no eschatology considers the permanence of humans essential to the permanence of things. We admit that the world existed before us, but not that it can end after us. [...] The world has never been so alive” (54, *translation is mine*).

Closing the creative writing and arts section are three images by Rowan Kilduff, which echo many of the topics raised already in the poems, from deep time and survival to slow violence and the search for more peaceful co-habitation. Mainly, though, they explore the role of the arts in processes of ecological transformation. The first artwork makes an overt visual reference to the horses depicted on the parietal walls of the Lascaux Cave, in France, estimated to be approximately 17,000 years old. The title, *What Will Last Another 40,000 Yrs?*, plays an important role in offering contextual information and aesthetic engagement, namely to trigger a reflection on the permanence of human and nonhuman cultures, a concept that takes inspiration from Sierra Nevada poet Gary Snyder and the whitewater poet Nanao Sakaki. In the photo collage titled *littleboy*, spatio-temporal planes overlap by combining Japanese lanterns that represent ancestral spirits, part of a photograph Kilduff took of a street-artist/activist in Nepal while painting during a protest for freedom of expression, and the planetary nebula NGC6781. While these interacting planes of existence are all connected by the threat of nuclear weapons, the chosen arrangement gives to activist practice a prominent role in opposing and keeping this threat under control. The third and last image is an example of Kilduff’s poster art. The combination of very few basic brushstrokes depicting a mountain and the motivational slogan “handle with care” conveys a message of collective responsibility in safeguarding the environment.

In order, then, to nourish a deeper sense of care, it is essential to visit the root causes of ecological collapse and to challenge the systems that support it. In fact, while the etymology of the word “collapse” indicates “falling together,” this collective descent is not universal, but rather based on socio-economic factors that perpetuate multispecies inequalities, reinforce exploitative practices, and create uneven exposure to ecological hazards. To counteract the pervasive effects of systemic injustices, the artistic contributions featured in the current issue take up an existential stance that promotes resilience and critical thinking, at times by raising awareness, and at other times by proactively contributing to the solution. Unanimously, they prompt a reconsideration of the concept of “end” beyond anthropocentric narratives of annihilation. As T.J. Demos affirms in his recent book

on radical futurisms, “addressing these questions requires politicizing time itself, disrupting its naturalizations and seeming inevitability” (9). What better than the imaginative power of the arts to give rise to alternative imaginaries that reframe the future through the lens of radical hope and multispecies solidarity?

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