

Introduction — World War Tree

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In putting together this special issue of *Hélice* on Speculative Landscapes, it was our aspiration to uncover and amplify fictional perspectives which engage with, and speculate on, unfamiliar landscapes as something far more *animate* than mere resources to be either silenced or sensationalised by human inhabitants. As this volume's contributors illustrate with verve, landscapes have the potential to be re-envisioned as critical actants across a range of speculative literary texts, if only we decenter our typically anthropocentric perspectives enough to truly *notice* and *admire* the alien primacy and fecundity of their roiling seascapes and verdant vistas. Such a radical rethinking of our species' relation to the landscapes it inhabits, and lives and breathes alongside, is more crucial now than ever before in recorded history.

As the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Sixth Assessment Report concludes, our own planet's landscapes are rapidly undergoing drastic short-term transformative changes due to anthropogenic factors. The wholesale thawing of Arctic permafrost stands to exacerbate planetary warming to runaway levels (Allan, 2021: 1270); droughts in arid areas are massively exacerbated by agricultural activity (1984); greenhouse gas emissions disrupt natural weather systems so greatly that new microclimates emerge (3514); ocean

acidification threatens the viability of aquatic ecosystems (1200); biodiversity is in rapid decline around the globe (211); sea level rise will reclaim vast areas of low-lying land (1687); deforestation leads to greater annual ranges in temperature (2814); and each year, air pollution kills approximately 4.2 million humans (1516). In parallel, we live in "a period in which human activity has multiplied the rate at which species are disappearing from the earth by a factor perhaps as large as a thousand" (Wallace-Wells, 2019: 96). We can no longer ignore the anthropogenic aetiology of the Anthropocene, Cthulucene and Capitalocene; human agency is now in many senses inseparable from the transmuting landscapes of planet Earth.

Indeed, due to our collective economic fixation on GDP-led growth, we are the "single species that is responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic" (Settele, 2020: online). More specifically, widespread "deforestation, uncontrolled expansion of agriculture, intensive farming, mining and infrastructure development, as well as the exploitation of wild species have created a 'perfect storm' for the spillover of diseases from wildlife to people", when coupled with "the unregulated trade in wild animals and the explosive growth of global air travel" (Settele, 2020: online). And if we are to have even a chance of avoiding

successive pandemics, we must fully recognise “the complex interconnections among the health of people, animals, plants and our shared environment” (Settele, 2020). The circumstances which give rise to such zoonoses are only exacerbated further by our fetishistic adherence to neoliberal economic paradigms, hence, the label zoonotic is greatly misleading, since “it is actually humanity’s destruction of biodiversity that creates the conditions for new viruses and diseases like COVID-19” (Vidal, 2020: online). Our subjective pandemic experiences over the last three years vigorously underscore that we are animals, interconnected with the living world around us as much as the technological apparatuses we fashion.

For such de-anthropocentric reasons, amongst others, the term human is rapidly becoming an outdated signifier. Critical posthumanists, for instance, propose that invocations of the term human must be qualified via neoteric formulations such as the extended mind thesis, which posit no firm boundary between species and environment.¹ As the rupture of our anthropocentric complacency in the pandemic context has foregrounded, our positionalities are certainly far more complex and interrelated than we typically acknowledge. As the prolific sf author Kim Stanley Robinson remarks of the COVID-19 pandemic, despite lifestyle alterations being most obvious, “the change that struck me seemed more abstract and internal [... t]he virus is rewriting our imaginations. What felt impossible has become thinkable” (Robinson, 2020: online). In a very science fictional manner, we are beginning to question many of our established assumptions about our role within the world around us. Perhaps humans have been theorising sentience wrongly for many centuries—we might instead

begin to comprehend the totality of our planet as the only real consciousness we have yet discovered. Moving far beyond Enlightenment ideals of rational man, we are beginning to accept new ideologies of relationality, such as James Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis (Lovelock, 1972).

As when reading speculative fictions, there is a permanence to the expanded awareness of our biological positionalities which Robinson theorises that many of us have acquired since the pandemic began. Amidst this broader perceptual shift, the Anthropocene entirely subverts “the dream of science fiction that the twentieth century placed so much imaginative investment in” (Canavan, 2021: 263), of our species transcending our earthly existence; either physically in spaceships, or psychically, by theorizing ourselves as beings distinct from our environment. Yet in itself, it is pivotal that climate change is “an event which we have become so habituated toward that we imagine it as a catastrophe that has already happened, against which no point of political resistance seems imaginable” (Canavan, 2021: 257). However, by uncovering the largely occluded position of landscapes within the literary imaginary, we can begin to at least comprehend the boundaries of our anthropocentric biases, and interrogate just how short-sighted our ecocidal behaviours are in the face of Earth’s almost unfathomable planetary deep time. As Amitav Ghosh emphasises:

it was in exactly the period in which human activity was changing the earth’s atmosphere that the literary imagination became radically centered on the human. Inasmuch as the nonhuman was written about at all, it was not within the mansion of serious fiction but rather in

¹ See, for instance, Clark and Chalmers, 1998 & Ferrando, 2019.

the outhouses to which science fiction and fantasy has been banished. (Ghosh, 2017: 66)

For Ghosh, speculative literatures are therefore in the unique position of being able to imaginatively address our catastrophic, and yet simultaneously everyday, Anthropocene reality.

Although Homer's *Odyssey* famously includes a recurrent and defamiliarising focus on the inexplicably wine-dark sea [Ancient Greek: οἶνοψ πόντος] that its characters cross and recross, it is not until Maragaret Cavendish's *The Description of a New World Called The Blazing-World* (1666) that the progenitors of our modern fantasy and science fiction texts began to interrogate the significance of landscape. From its earliest pages, Cavendish is at pains to foreground the significance of alien geography:

they were not onely driven to the very end or point of the Pole of that World, but even to another Pole of another World, which joined close to it; so that the cold having a double strength at the conjunction of those two Poles, was insupportable: [...] You must know, that each of these Worlds having its own Sun to enlighten it, they move each one in their peculiar Circles; which motion is so just and exact, that neither can hinder or obstruct the other; for they do not exceed their Tropicks: and although they should meet, yet we in this World cannot so well perceive them, by reason of the brightness of our Sun, which being nearer to us, obstructs the splendor of the Sun of the other World, they being too far off

to be discerned by our optick perception, except we use very good Telescopes; by which, skilful Astronomers have often observed two or three Suns at once. [...] finding the Boat swim between two plains of Ice, as a stream that runs betwixt two shores, [she] at last perceived land, but covered all with Snow: from which came, walking upon the Ice, strange Creatures... (Cavendish, 2016: online)

Indeed, much of the early portion of this early speculative fiction text fixates on explicating the differences in landscape and inhabitants between its protagonist's familiar home planet, and the new world which she is quickly installed as Empress of. Even the starkly unfamiliar landscapes of *The Blazing World*, Cavendish implies by this plot point, are subject to the whims of human agency. Such proprietorial attitudes to landscapes remain ascendant almost four hundred years later, yet alien landscapes themselves are no longer confined to the imaginary realm of speculative fiction.

A century and a half later, Mary Shelley's early SF novel *Frankenstein* (1818) was famously conceived as a ghost story in a competition to match on paper the chilling atmosphere of 1816's 'Year Without a Summer'—an almost unprecedented climactic event affecting the majority of Europe, which had been generated by the explosion of Mount Tambora. The genesis of this foundational speculative text was therefore closely enmeshed with the vagaries of the earthly landscapes Shelley inhabited.² It is likewise instructive to consider the resolution of H.G. Wells novel *The War of the Worlds* (1897)

² Hence, *Frankenstein* is much akin to Woodie Guthrie's concept album *Dust Bowl Ballads* (1940), itself a foundational popular music album, and an extended rumination on life in the American Dust Bowl of the 1930s—a miniature climate crisis resulting from cavalier agricultural practices across the Central states having disrupted the ability of indigenous grasses to reclaim sun-baked topsoil.

from a similar perspective. In its narrative, the ascendant, technologically superior, Martian invaders are ultimately “slain by the putrefactive and disease bacteria against which their systems were unprepared; [...] slain, after all man’s devices had failed, by the humblest things that God, in his wisdom, has put upon this earth” (Wells, 2013: 120). Wells’s famous eucatastrophe is not only de-anthropocentric, but also firmly grounded in the everyday world—rigorously upending our familiarity with the common cold to great dramatic effect. Yet it is less widely acknowledged that this non-anthropocentric ending was almost certainly inspired by Wells having lived through the first true global pandemic less than a decade earlier—the Asiatic flu of 1889 and 1890, itself a variant of coronavirus.³

Suggestively, Wells contracted what he describes as “influenza” paired with “congestion of the right lung” (Wells, 1967: 314) in April 1890, which left him incapacitated “in bed” (Wells, 2021: 157) for two days. Since he distinctively mentions this illness in multiple contemporary letters, we can safely infer that he contracted a particularly virulent strain of flu. If this inference is correct, not only did the cultural imaginary of the 1889/1890 pandemic indirectly contribute to the thematic genesis of *The War of The Worlds*, but the coetaneous coronavirus also contributed to the authorship of the text more directly, via its intrusion into, and subsequent coaction with, Wells’s cells and microbiota. Nevertheless, it is understandable that for both logistical and anthropocentric reasons, co-authorship of texts is not typically attributed to microscopic forms of life, or in the case of *Frankenstein*, landscapes and volcanism. Ultimately, the two overtly warring species in Wells’s text are rendered as planetary functions,

prompting a reconsideration of its title’s significance.

Speculative landscapes often play a centralising role in more contemporary texts. J. G. Ballard’s first four novels each document the intensification of one terrestrial atmospheric or meteorological datum into the form of a novum, with these particular phenomena thereafter forming almost the entire premise of their speculative visions. In *The Wind From Nowhere* (1961) constantly strengthening winds decimate human civilisation; in *The Drowned World* (1962) an underwater London has become a jungle interspersed aquatic world as a result of solar radiation melting the polar icecaps; in *The Burning World* (1964; later *The Drought*) a protracted drought generated by radioactive waste has left only minute portions of the globe inhabitable; in *Equinox* (1964; later *The Crystal World*) a strange crystalline manifestation begins to spread across the globe from out of the jungles of Africa. In each instance, our regular Earthly landscapes become transmogrified, and in short order, indifferently begin to reduce their human carrying capacity.

Meanwhile, in Brian Aldiss’s sprawling novel *Helliconia* (1982-5), a future human civilisation on the text’s eponymous planet is subject to phenotypic plasticity—like grasshoppers and locusts on our own Earth—and thereby undergoes a dramatic virus-mediated biological upheaval twice every Great Year, in tandem with the other flora and fauna of the planet. Even more starkly than the Terran humans who observe their civilisations rising and falling on the planet from afar, Helliconian humans are co-active actants firmly grounded within the planetary landscapes they inhabit. Nevertheless, the amnesia caused by the immense length of the planet’s Great Year

³ Allen Stroud, for instance, neglects this background when discussing *The War of the Worlds* in the context of COVID-19 (Stroud, 2020).

(equivalent to 1959 terrestrial years) ensures that each human generation facing the recursive rupture of its ecological niche is unaware of the greater planetary cycles its existence contributes towards, and hence, generation upon generation lives and dies recursively with no knowledge of this long-dormant aspect of their species' biology. The greatest consciousness in the novel is therefore the intricate and self-perpetuating life systems of the planet Helliconia itself.

In Christopher Nolan's blockbuster film *Interstellar* (2014), a mid twenty-first century Earth is beset by climate change phenomena, and the human species is facing almost certain extinction until a beneficent extraterrestrial force points the way to a wormhole in space opening onto a dozen extra-solar worlds. With the aim of securing humanity's future, the crew of the *Endurance* sets out from a world ravaged by climbing temperatures and dust storms to find a suitable candidate for the rehabilitation of *Homo sapiens*. Landing on an ocean world, the team is almost immediately engulfed by tidal waves many times the height of a terrestrial skyscraper, towering expanses of water which nearly eclipse the screen. As opposed to CGI-generated environments, most shots in the movie were filmed on Earth against dazzling terrestrial backdrops, including those depicting the dazzling ice planet Mann.⁴ Likewise, by the end of the plot the survey team do not succeed in reaching a habitable planet, and the future of humanity is only secured by gratuitous time travel; by implication, Earth itself is the true best choice, prior to the onset of the Anthropocene.

Even more recently, N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015-2017) has become the first trilogy in history whose each individual

volume has won the prestigious Hugo Award.⁵ Depicting a harsh dystopian reality on a planet wracked by immense seismic activity, it sees a dystopian human civilisation enslaving and feeding off the powers of its own landscape-attuned Orogenes in order to eke out a meager living on a continent ironically named the Stillness. Only by learning to collaborate with the geological forces of the planet in humanoid form can humanity learn to free itself from its self-imposed shackles. Received with almost unparalleled fervour by fans of both Fantasy and SF, the trilogy's meteoric reception indicates that such commensurate depictions of speculative landscapes are beginning, perhaps, to establish a well-overdue niche within the minds of audiences.

World War Tree is not a battle. It is a dire call for action; for recognition of the puissance and irreducibility of our planetary environment, and towards a widespread recognition that the only speculative future which our species has *even the chance* of living upon Earth, depends upon our modes of relation with those same landscapes we continue to despoil and overpopulate in the present day. None of those speculative landscapes discussed in brief thus far are the subject of any of the six articles comprising the *Hélice* special issue which follows. Rather, between them, our contributors' articles delineate a tantalising plethora of further worlds and alien landscapes...

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Amongst the extraordinary contributions to this issue,⁶ we must note that one article has been produced through, and in defiance

⁴ In this instance, the Svínafellsjökull Glacier in Iceland.

⁵ At the time of its original publication.

⁶ All of which are not only peer-reviewed, but also insightful, inventive, and wonderfully diverse responses to the issue's overarching theme of speculative landscapes.

of, the incalculably difficult circumstances of war. Despite her entire livelihood having been relocated following Russia's unjust invasion of Ukraine, and whilst under constant threat of unprovoked attacks upon unarmed civilians, Sofiya Filonenko has fought ceaselessly to preserve a culture of active scholarship at Berdyansk University, formerly located in the occupied territory. It is a testament to the resilience of her and her fellows that Sofiya's article on Edgar Rice Burroughs' *A Princess of Mars* appears in this special issue, quite in spite of ongoing attempts to render the Ukrainian populace voiceless.

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We are honoured to open the issue with an invited article by Chris Pak, author of *Terraforming: Ecopolitical Transformations and Environmentalism in Science Fiction* (Liverpool University Press, 2016). In this contribution, which comprises part of the ongoing collaborative research project Narrating Rural Change, Pak investigates depictions of farming and agriculture across landscapes in three exemplars of Welsh sf, proving, as he does so, the as-yet insufficiently appreciated wealth of that country's speculative tradition.

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