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## “Like a Small Seed of Hope Blowing in”: Pandemic Prolepsis in Contemporary Canadian Fiction

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### Résumé

*Dans un monde de risques et de scénarios catastrophiques où l'ambiance apocalyptique l'emporte sur l'espoir, la littérature post-apocalyptique est en plein essor, notamment dans la littérature canadienne où les scénarios de survie ont une longue tradition. En créant des espaces hypothétiques et en permettant aux lecteurs et lectrices d'imaginer et d'explorer des futurs possibles, la littérature remplit une fonction proleptique et cathartique. Cet article collectif examine trois romans dystopiques d'écrivaines canadiennes contemporaines qui mettent en scène des pandémies ou des mondes post-pandémiques proposant ce que Christof Mauch nomme « slow hope » (espoir lent). Le roman *Songs for the End of the World* (2020) de Saleema Nawaz anticipe la pandémie de Covid-19 ; *Station Eleven* (2015) d'Emily St. John Mandel imagine un monde post-pandémique avec seulement 1 % de l'humanité ayant survécu à un virus. Ce faisant, Mandel, tout comme la québécoise Catherine Mavrikakis dans son roman *Oscar de Profundis* (2016), s'inspire du passé en déployant un futur post-catastrophique. Ces trois exemples littéraires ont en commun de créer des scénarios de catastrophe tout en nous rappelant les valeurs de notre présent et son humanisme ainsi que la volonté de l'humanité de survivre au milieu de la catastrophe.*

### Abstract

*As our world today is characterized by risk and catastrophic scenarios as well as a doomsday mood, post-apocalyptic literature is booming. This holds especially true for Canadian settler literature, which has always dealt with scenarios of survival. As literature creates hypothetical realms which allow readers to play out possible futures, it serves a proleptic and cathartic function. This collaborative article examines dystopian narratives in contemporary Canadian literature by women writers who depict pandemics or post-pandemic worlds that offer what Christof Mauch has termed “slow hope.” Saleema Nawaz’s 2020 novel *Songs for the End of the World* anticipates the Covid-19 pandemic; Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven* (2015) imagines a post-pandemic world in which only 1% of humanity has survived a deadly virus. In doing so, Mandel, like Catherine Mavrikakis in her 2016 novel *Oscar de Profundis*, incorporates memories of the past into the imagination of a post-disaster future. What all three literary examples have in common*

*is that they not only create disaster scenarios, but also remind us of the values of the present and focus on humanity as well as humanity's will to survive in the midst of catastrophe.*

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"The pandemic is a portal [...] a gateway between one world and the next."  
-- Arundhati Roy<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction<sup>2</sup>

Pandemics bring to light deep-seated archaic fears and drives of a society (Girard 1974). They create "a language of fear" (Loiacono 2015) and spawn an array of recurring tropes and symbolic formations (Cooke 2009), which develop a trajectory of their own. Generally, pandemic literature can be classified as a subgenre of pathography or the "illness narrative" (Wald 2008, 2). Like illness and its symbolic constructions (Sontag 1978), pandemic narratives project societal fears and interpret the virus as an incarnation of evil, as god's punishment, or as unwanted consequence of technical progress and environmental destruction. By nature, pandemics globally afflict both individuals and nations and thus have a high potential for social, economical, and political disruption. In the words of Jennifer Cooke, "the social disorder that results from the plague can become a plague itself" (2009, 5) as the fear of social and democratic disintegration surpasses the virus's death threat.

In our times of risk societies (Beck 1990) and of imminent environmental and technological apocalypses that we are unable to grasp (Žižek 2010), narratives obtain a vital role in making imaginable what is not really fathomable, especially as scientific discourses have lost their authoritative impetus. Today's risks, according to Beck, differ from previous ones in that they are caused by too much knowledge and technology instead of too little. While we *know* about impending catastrophes, we nonetheless cannot *really* imagine them. And this is the very function of proleptic dystopian narratives: to close the gap between what we know and what we refuse to imagine (Wolf-Meyer 2019). Such dystopian narratives, postapocalyptic ones in particular,

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1 See Roy 2020.

2 All texts have a genesis and so does this one. Like many other academic societies, the Association for Canadian Studies in German-speaking Countries moved online for its annual conference in 2021 and topicalized the new realities Covid-19 had created for Canadian society, politics, economics, academia, and the arts. As Head of the Women and Gender Studies section, Dunja M. Mohr organized an online Literary Café with readings by Larissa Lai and Saleema Nawaz from their pandemic dystopias *The Tiger Flu* (2018) and *Songs for the End of the World* (2020), and with Louise Dupré and her translator, Ursula Mathis-Moser, from her highly acclaimed book *Tout comme elle* (2006) and all three of us gave short papers on Canadian pandemic dystopias in our section meeting. From here on, the idea to co-author an article probing Canadian pandemic dystopias quickly evolved. See also the interview conducted by Dunja M. Mohr ("We Should Instead Dream of a Better World That Is Anchored in the One That Exists Now" Saleema Nawaz and Larissa Lai in Conversation with Dunja M. Mohr, 67-78 in this volume).

outline possible scenarios for the world after a catastrophe.<sup>3</sup> From a possible future, they cast a critical glance into the past, our present, to make the consequences of our actions graspable. They have a cautionary and premonitory effect and function as catharsis of our fears and anxieties about an unpredictable future. Some dystopias re-route us to the (distant) past—what Zygmunt Bauman calls a ‘retrotopia’ (2017)—to give us the chance to avoid mistakes of the present and hence avoid catastrophic futures.

As a literature distinctly attuned to human-nature-animal relationalities—positioning nature as the monstrous adversary and animals as an intricate part of Canadian identity—the long-standing (albeit contested universalist) Canadian topos of survival<sup>4</sup> and a distinct turn towards indigenous knowledge and practices perhaps contribute to the popularity of dystopian fiction in recent Canadian literature in particular.<sup>5</sup> A list of Canadian authors particularly prolific in the genre is prominently led by Margaret Atwood with her *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003–2013), *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) and *The Testaments* (2019) as well as *The Heart Goes Last* (2015), and includes Nalo Hopkinson’s *Falling in Love with Hominids* (2015), Daniel Kallas’s *Pandemic: A Novel* (2005) and *We All Fall Down* (2019), Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven* (2014) and, to some extent, the parallel universe of dystopian capitalism in *The Glass Hotel* (2020), Christian Guay-Poliquin’s *Le fil des kilomètres* (2013), *Le poids de la neige* (2016) and *Les ombres filantes* (2021), Wayde Compton’s *The Outer Harbour* (2014), Thomas King’s *The Back of the Turtle* (2014), Catherine Mavrikakis’s *Oscar de Profundis* (2016), Cherie Dimaline’s *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) and its sequel *Hunting By Stars* (2021), both Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl* (2002) and *The Tiger Flu* (2018), J.D. Kurtzness’s *Aquariums* (2020) and Saleema Nawaz’s stunningly prescient *Songs for the End of the World* (2020).

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3 The genre of postapocalyptic fiction constitutes an oxymoron (Berger 1999). It sets in with the ending of the world but “[t]he end of the world is, oddly, a rich beginning for narrative” (Tate 2017, 22).

4 See, for instance, Gadpaille 2014.

5 Extending fantastical elements and futurism inherent to indigenous narrative traditions, indigenous Canadian dystopias have been on the rise for some time, winning numerous prestigious awards. An “[i]ndigenous futurism[]” that creatively connects fictional futures with colonial atrocities of the past reclaims the future, rejecting “theoretical, institutional, and political projects that imagined Indigenous peoples in the past and excluded them from the future” (Topash-Caldwell 2020, 29). A case in point are Métis writer Cherie Dimaline’s novels (*The Marrow Thieves*, 2017, *Empire of Wild*, 2019, and *Hunting By Stars*, 2021) which topicalize satellite schools (resurrected residential schools), the captivity of indigenous people as a (cultural) source for (psychological) survival—hunted for their bone marrow that can create dreams, an ability most other peoples have lost—the North as the land of survival, and the importance of wide kinship and of story. As Dimaline explains, “[t]he only way I know who I am and who my community is, and the ways in which we survive and adapt, is through stories” (Alter 2020). Similarly, in Catherine Knutsson’s *Shadows Cast by Stars* (2013) indigenous peoples are hunted for their blood’s antibodies which protect them from a global pandemic. See also Kristina Baudeman, *The Future Imaginary in Indigenous North American Arts and Literatures* (2021).

In the following, we first address the generic developments and the prevalence of dystopian literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in conjunction with the quite distinct temporalities of previous pandemic literature predominantly located in the past in order to highlight the importance of the narrative shift of pandemic literature towards pandemic dystopias and thus from the past to the future. Importantly, this generic shift involves a more hopeful approach—generically, 21<sup>st</sup> century dystopias include utopian elements—and thus a functional change. Against this background we examine three Canadian pandemic dystopias—Nawaz’s *Songs for the End of the World*, Mandel’s *Station Eleven*, and Mavrikakis’ *Oscar de Profundis*—for their proleptic, albeit varying, future temporalities and the incorporated elements of ‘slow hope’; i.e., a powerful “language of positive change, visions of a better future,” (Mauch 2019, 18) with transformative narratives that “work quietly towards a more hopeful future” (20). Notably, these dystopias ascribe slow hope quite specifically to art.

### **The Prolepsis of Literature and the Notion of ‘Slow Hope’**

Every century has its own societal, economic, technological, biological and, collaterally, its imaginative crises. The still young 21<sup>st</sup> century has already faced a number of crises, 9/11 in 2001, the financial crash in 2008, DAESH terrorism, the deep and far-reaching global consequences of the climate crisis, and a number of pandemics (SARS, MERS etc.) with the current Covid-19 pandemic being the most severe. Aesthetic representations have always been quick to process collective and individual experiences and traumata. It is perhaps then no surprise that 21<sup>st</sup> century Anglophone fiction has taken a speculative turn that leans towards a dystopian cultural imaginary, often incorporating an ecocritical approach. Critics and writers have diagnosed the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s literary dystopian ailments: This is the “golden age of dystopian fiction” (Lepore 2017), dystopia “defines the spirit of our times” (Claeys 2016, 498) and has become “fashionable,” but also contributes to “our all-encompassing hopelessness” (Robinson 2018, n.p.). In a spirit of decadence and inevitable looming doom, dystopia has been “appropriated,” “tamed,” and “commodified” (Baccolini 2020, D43). The morbid collective memory of the 21<sup>st</sup> century accumulates speculative narratives about living in the end times, the dissolution of societies, the ambiguities of biotechnological innovations and CRISPR-CAS gene manipulations, climate catastrophe and pandemics, the erasure of biodiversity, mass extinction in the Anthropocene and enshrines the terror of an imminent “biospheric dystopia” (Robinson 2018, n.p.).

But is that true? Have we collectively lost all hope as we revel in literary dystopia? Are these indeed predominantly fictions of “helplessness and hopelessness” (Lepore 2017)? Importantly with the late 20<sup>th</sup> century’s turn towards decanonization, diversity, cross-fertilization, hybridity, dissolution, and fluidity, the generic boundaries of dystopia and utopia have been flexibilized and, although the contemporary dystopian

narrative indubitably dominates, many texts additionally offer narrative utopian elements of processual microtransformations.<sup>6</sup> Thus, while dystopias *are* unquestionably fictional seismographs of potentially negative contemporary socio-economic, political, ecological, and cultural-technological developments with the distinct impetus to warn, they are also beacons of a distinct belief in the potential for a future *more* utopian world cognizant of cooperation and community that include post-anthropocentric perspectives, multiple cross-materialities and planetary interdependencies. This utopianism is not radical but rather of a soft radicality that allows us to catch an imaginative deeper glimpse of our potential.

For this kind of glimpse, and in the context of ecocritical texts, Christof Mauch has coined the term “slow hope.” In his essay *Slow Hope: Rethinking Ecologies of Fear and Crisis* (2019), Mauch argues that without “downplay[ing] the threat of ecological change and vast potential catastrophe” and without yielding to “unadulterated optimism” (3), we nonetheless are in desperate need for “hopeful narratives (3).” Mauch uses ‘slow hope’ as a counter approach to Rob Nixon’s concept of ‘slow violence’, which refers to the insidious violence with which we are inexorably destroying our planet. Without denying the “ecological traps” (14) that humanity has created for itself in the epoch of the Anthropocene, Mauch nonetheless argues that “if we acknowledge that human manipulation of the Earth has been a destructive force that has caused huge converging threats [...], we can also imagine that human endeavors can help us build a less destructive world in the centuries to come” (18). While dystopian narratives of climate catastrophes paralyze us in despair, hopeful narratives “help us think creatively” (3), he claims. We need stories which, while not minimizing the effects of climate crisis and other catastrophes, give us a glimmer of hope and a vision of a better future, in which we can and will have learned from our mistakes. Mauch also connects his notion of slow hope to Ernst Bloch’s opus magnum *The Principle of Hope*, in which the philosopher postulated that the most tragic form of loss is to lose our capacity to imagine change and to hope, because it is exactly that capacity which makes us human. Narratives of slow hope, Mauch concludes, are “stories, visions, and actions that work *quietly* toward a more hopeful future” (20; emphasis added). Stories, in other words, that do not unrealistically portray our future in bright colors, but, which instead, amidst all the real ecological catastrophes kindle our capacity to change, to wonder, and to hope. We need stories which counteract a dire reality and enable us to imagine a different future. With the Corona pandemic, dystopian stock features—tracing, lockdowns, quarantines, border closures, food pantry lines, curtailed liberties and the upsurge of conspiracy theories, a looming medical crisis—

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6 Several critics have paved this trajectory, see Sarah Lefanu’s “hidden utopian streak” (1989, 75) in feminist dystopian novels of the late 1970s, Lyman Tower Sargent’s “critical dystopias” (1994, 7), Tom Moylan’s imperfect and dynamic “critical utopias” (1986, 10), Raffaella Baccolini’s “utopian horizon” (2004, 518), Mohr’s “transgressive utopian dystopia” (2005, 2007), or Atwood’s “ustopia” (2011).

have suddenly become part of the world we live in, although we are affected by different degrees (cf. Braidotti 2020). While pandemic dystopian imaginaries aesthetically topicalize our current condition, we are horrified by the sudden overspill into the real world, as visibly and tragically, Covid-19 demonstrates once more the inter-relatedness not only of Anthropos and the planetary system, but also of fiction and reality. Notably, 21<sup>st</sup>-century pandemic literature has intensely merged with the dystopian genre and these pandemic dystopias essentially differ from the older pandemic literature in their temporality and function. Pandemic dystopias' focus on the future, on change, solidarity and collaboration, significantly diverges from literary predecessors.

In contrast, earlier Western literature about pandemics, diseases, and infections differs in its temporal approach and function in that these either direct or indirect pandemic narratives historicize and moralize in *retrospection* the witnessed experience of the devastating plague.<sup>7</sup> In direct pandemic narratives the present dominates everything, obliterates the past, and all hope for a future vanishes: "Sans mémoire et sans espoir, ils s'installaient dans le présent. [...] et il n'y avait plus pour nous que des instants" (Camus 1962, 1367).<sup>8</sup> Against the First World War's iconic mass death, the experience of the Spanish flu's pandemic mass death of 1918/1919 generates indirect pandemic narratives of atmospheric silences, a "modernist mystery" (Outka 2020, 1) of repressed vulnerabilities,<sup>9</sup> what Charles de Paolo (2014) calls "cultural amnesia."<sup>10</sup> In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the literary microscope of pop-cultural pandemic "outbreak narratives" (Wald 2008, 2),<sup>11</sup> often medical crime or bioterror thrillers, renders the invisible virus visible, typically tracing a pattern of pandemic perception, global expansion and catastrophe, epidemiological research, and victorious eradication.<sup>12</sup>

In contradistinction, 21<sup>st</sup> century pandemic dystopian narratives proleptically speculate about a *future* pandemic and a post-pandemic world to come. While the direct

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7 Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1340-1350) describes the decadence of privileged self-isolation postulating a moral turnaround; Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) gives a fictive eyewitness account and implies divine punishment; Katherine Anne Porter's semi-autobiographical account fictionalizes her own traumatic experiences in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939).

8 "Without memories, without hope, they lived for the moment only. [...] and nothing was left us but a series of present moments." Transl. Dunja M. Mohr.

9 It is a female discourse of suffering, as invisible as the virus. In Outka's pandemic sensitive re-reading, "metaphors of modernism take on new meanings: fragmentation and disorder emerge as signs of delirium as well as shrapnel; invasions become ones of microbes and not only men; postwar ennui reveals a brooding fear of an invisible enemy" (Outka 2020, 3).

10 See also Crosby 2003; Bristow 2012.

11 "In its scientific, journalistic, and fictional incarnations [the outbreak narrative] follows a formulaic plot that begins with the identification of an emerging infection, includes discussions of the global networks throughout which it travels, and chronicles the epidemiological work that ends with its containment" (Wald 2008, 2). However, the specificities of a pandemic, simultaneously erupting all over the world, challenge the containment narrative but retain part of it.

12 Popular movies, such as *Outbreak* (1995) or *Contagion* (2011), use this narrative pattern.

pandemic narrative expands the pandemic present and negates a future and the indirect pandemic narrative represses the pandemic present, the proleptic pandemic dystopian narrative explicitly constructs a porous temporal tension between a dark pandemic future, a defamiliarized fictional present, and the hermeneutical repercussion of these affective simulations into the real world of the readers. When fiction, however, turns into reality, as it seems to do with the Covid-19 pandemic, “when fiction becomes a real catastrophe” (Bronfen 2020, 18),<sup>13</sup> the question arises what societies can indeed learn from pandemic literature, film, and art. What can pandemic dystopias contribute to a better understanding of pandemic reality? The sudden porosity between fictional dystopia and dystopian reality may freeze us into a desperate, nihilistic limbo, as we begin to realize that as a collective, we are perpetrators, witnesses, and co-victims of our own destructiveness all at the same time. Alternatively, an intensive ‘pandemic practice,’ the consistent immersion in apocalyptic imaginaries and simulations, may foster a greater psychological resilience as a recent study has shown (cf. Scrivner/Johnson/Kjelgaard-Christiansen/Clasen 2021). According to another study (Doherty/Giordano 2020), watching pandemic movies engages the brain in processes of potential reactions and allows viewers to regard their fears from a distance. Postapocalyptic narratives thus help us to provisionally grasp the ungraspable and understand the unfathomable.

Most importantly, however, pandemic dystopias introduce different temporal correlations. In a complex tension of temporalities, the recognizable elements of our contemporary reality extrapolated into a fictional future’s pandemic end time render our actual present time sufficiently similar and different to hermeneutically both estrange us from *and* rebound with the present. As time axes dissolve, modes of repercussion become porous, as fictional futures, perceived in the real past, happen in the actual present time. Here, the fictional future is already our reality without a significant difference. When fiction’s end time turns into lived time, we must ask what else the fictional world has to offer. 21<sup>st</sup> century pandemic dystopias not only differ from the older pandemic literature in their temporalities, but importantly also in their *function*. Their proleptic impulses of challenged order offer both aesthetic relief (it is not quite that bad – yet) and an invitation for actual change that does not ask for a radical break or change, but rather invites gradual changes in the present that will result in greater changes in the future. This is the principle of slow hope that recognizes the potential of a ‘soft radicality’ that responds to the “political exercise of the insurgent hope of the utopian impulse with its transformative capacity” (Moylan 1986, 1) but not as a radical and immediate transformation.

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13 “Wenn Fiktion zu einer realen Katastrophe wird” (Transl. Dunja M. Mohr).

**“The imagination is very resilient”: Saleema Nawaz’s *Songs for the End of the World* (2020)**

Although it generically classifies as a dystopia, Saleema Nawaz’s prescient *Songs for the End of the World*—a novel for which the Montréal based writer meticulously researched epidemiology, the flu and SARS in particular, for seven years—the novel is firmly told in the realist mode and invests in individual characters and the broad spectrum of human responses to a crisis. As a dystopian narrative speculating about future pandemics, *Songs* comes surrealistically close to our current pandemic reality in its uncanny description of a world riven by a global Corona pandemic (here called ARAMIS), originating in China in the year 2020, that kills people all over the world. In fact, reading Nawaz’s *Songs* in April 2020 when the e-book was released (a print version came out in August 2020) effectively dissolved time axes, as the reading unwittingly merges dystopian future, fictional “unreality” (*Songs*, 7), and the unfolding pandemic reality of spring 2020, as people masked up, isolated, hoarded, and socially distanced in lockdowns, fearful of going outside for basic necessities. Impressionably, the novel describes what we experience as our present pandemic reality:

Jojo is dead. So are Cam and Lucas and the master. Teresa, Declan, Felix and Paloma are in the hospital. It’s that bad flu that’s on the news [...]. The [Corona] virus [is]...more infectious and deadly than the swine flu. New York health authorities working with the CDC had begun reconstructing the movements of the first people to contract the illness. (6; 7)  
[From his quarantine] he could see that the world outside had changed [...]. The runners wore masks [...]. The teens did not laugh their way down the street in a lolling clump but walked separately, heads down. (21)

In fact, her novel creates an anticipatory future so close to real time that the novel’s temporality levels narrative as well as temporal self-distance and creates a co-presence in the sense of a “virtual future” “installed in the present,” “a quasi-temporal self-reflection: a lived experience of the historical present which walks *pari passu* with its future memory” (Currie 2013, 67). Thus transcending the textual divide, Nawaz’s novel uses “*rhetorical prolepsis*” (Currie 2007, 29) “which takes place between the time locus of the narrator and the time locus of the reader” (31), positioning the reader in an anticipatory present that is a fictional co-present imagined in the recent past as our potential, albeit still fictional, future.<sup>14</sup> Although the narrative time frame of the novel spans the ongoing pandemic present from August to December 2020, interrupted by

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14 Currie differentiates between narratological, structural, and rhetorical prolepsis. The narratological prolepsis “takes place within the time locus of the narrated” or a “flash-forward” to future events within the narrative cosmos (2007, 31), while the structural prolepsis “takes place between the time locus of the narrated and the time locus of the narrator” (31). The narratological and the rhetorical prolepsis “indicate a conscious concern with the temporality of narrative” (32).



four retrospective pre-pandemic chapters shifting from 1999 to 2016 that reveal past key events, it never turns to the *post*-pandemic time or what the reader of 2020 would consider a future. This exclusion of the future further contributes to the novel's eerie prescient co-present both familiar and strange.

Initially set in New York—because “it’s more fractured and more divided than Canadian society” and “there is that kind of population density....[and] that possibility of fear” (Rogers 2020) that drives actions, as Nawaz explains in a CBC Radio interview—where the outbreak in the USA begins, but moving around the North American East and the West Coast, *Songs for the End of the World* is a story about the spread of a pandemic, the political, medical, community, and individual stressors as well as coping strategies of living in pandemic times, focusing on the individual repercussions in particular. Against the pandemic dystopian background, *Songs for the End of the World* describes the hopeful potential dormant in the characters, showing the impact the virus has on each character in everyday life, how it affects their relationships and professional lives and how they come to refuse to be defeated by ARAMIS. Their emotional journeys take them from established patterns of self-absorption, dislocation and stasis, separation, loneliness, guilt, and mostly dysfunctional parental and marital relationships, sibling and friendship commitments—towards conscious choices of solidarity, community, responsibility, and change. Coming to terms with their pasts, they are less concerned with the future than with the immediate pandemic present.

The non-linear third-person narrative parades an impressive kaleidoscope of characters—the inside cover visualizes this knot of their multiple interconnections with criss-crossing lines that connect the names—to narrate the complicated intertwined web of relationships between the seven main characters and their families and friends. Although the seventeen chapters are individually focused on a specific character in a certain month and year, the novel clearly aims at addressing universal themes—such as solitude and community/family, missed opportunities, loss, and remorse, commitment and wanted as well as rejected offspring and (desired, missed or dreaded) parenthood—that reach far beyond the pandemic theme. Taken together, the characters’ singular stories paint a societal panorama across time. Together they co-generate the brainwaves of the novel’s (society’s) deep collective memory, visually captured through chapters arranged like an EEG on the contents page. Collages, newspaper articles, emails, songs, diaries, letters, books, and political statements supplement the narrative set-up and further multiply the perspectives.

The character cast revolves around the protagonist Elliot, a 35-year-old police officer, and his sister Sarah, a philosophy student and single mother, and her young son Noah. Both siblings are drifters in search for love and meaning in life. Some storylines intertwine casually, for instance, when the first responder Elliot is called to the outbreak restaurant and fleetingly passes the asymptomatic waitress suspected to have spread the virus. The media’s sensationalist hunt for this presumed “patient zero”—

dubbing her “ARAMIS girl” and “typhoid Mary”<sup>15</sup>—drives the fearful Asian foreign exchange student into hiding (later Naomi resurfaces as ‘Edith’, the survival strategist’s assistant), when she is framed, along with all Asians, as the racial scapegoat by conspiracists. Sarah in turn is friends with the indie rockstar Stu and his pregnant wife Emma, singer in their popular band *The Dove Suit*, who stand for art and a free lifestyle. Their naïve attempt to organize a well-meant “benefit concert to raise money for ARAMIS antivirals” (232) results in a superspreader event with “up to 3.000 infections [...] traced to the concert” (233) in previously mildly affected Canada.

With two male characters, the widowed, socially inept, and reclusive philosophy professor Keelan and the self-absorbed author and divorced womanizer Owen, Nawaz includes a meta-fictional level and a fact and fiction blurring doubling plot. Keelan is an expert for emergency preparedness and now famous because of his philosophy books on coping strategies, *Ethics for End Times* and *The Survivalist’s Code* (320), that advocate “the importance of cooperative principles and natural empathy” (299). His story arc enables public discussions about the end of the world, human behaviour, and global as well as national reactions to pandemics from a philosophical and historical perspective. Because of his bestselling novel *How to avoid the Plague*, the public turns to Owen “like a prophet” (171)—a “real charlatan when it came to peddling so-called pandemic expertise” (292)—as presumed expert on the ARAMIS pandemic (uncannily, this doubles Nawaz’s own position as author of a pandemic novel also asked to write columns in 2020). A game company’s cynical attempt to cash in on Owen’s pandemic novel coinciding with a real pandemic with interactive VR Games that simulate agency and control, “[people] want to feel like their choices are meaningful, even if they’re not” (120), is exactly the storyline *Songs* thwarts. Both Keelan and Owen are dysfunctional, flawed characters who eventually choose to shed their narcissistic cocoons and risk a lethal infection in order to save a child and thus, symbolically, the future—Keelan drives off to aide his long-lost daughter Julia, Sarah’s partner; Owen helps to take Sarah’s sick Noah to hospital—a choice that kills them both. Their choices are indeed very meaningful acts of unconditional love and a sacrifice in the name of an anticipated future.

Carefully balanced between a dystopian near future novel and realism on the extradiegetic level, the novel’s intradiegetic porosity between fiction and reality could result in desperate nihilism or heroic overcompensation. Instead, Nawaz’s novel offers a counter narrative, one that paves the way for different, non-spectacular everyday small scale heroic actions and fosters the ‘pandemic practice’ resilience that neuroscience (Scrivner et al. 2021; Doherty/Giordano 2020) has studied in audience reactions to cultural crisis representations. Although a future “disaster story,” *Songs* retains both

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15 This is a reference to Mary Mallon, the first asymptomatic carrier of the typhoid fever infecting dozens of people in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the USA. For a short historical summary see Marineli et al. 2013.

“realistic and hopeful” (Rogers 2020, emphasis added) elements. Intentionally challenging dystopian stock elements, such as post-crisis societal breakdown and a Darwinian fight for survival—because “stories shape our beliefs” (Rogers 2020)—Nawaz positions hope against the dominant collective pop-cultural repository that visually prepares us for certain behavioural reactions to catastrophes, as she maintains in a CBC radio interview, “[i]f you see a Hollywood disaster movie and you think that everybody is going to be hoarding, looting or turning on one another — how does that affect your own behaviour?” (Rogers 2020).

In the novel, Keelan criticizes exactly this cultural lore about societal effects and breakdown in pandemic times driven by “Hollywood narratives [...] the stories they told [...] they were doomed to re-enact. Human beings were always looking for a script” (*Songs*, 301). Nawaz’s novel delivers a different script, one of cooperation and community building similar to Larissa Lai’s *Grist Sisterhood* in *The Tiger Flu* or Margaret Atwood’s multispecies posthuman community in the *MaddAddam* trilogy, but differs from these communities and relationalities that stretch beyond the human, as Nawaz’s story focuses on humans only.

The novel thus includes many small gestures of help and ‘slow hope’—Stu’s friend Jericho, for instance, engages in spreading “Useful Esperanto Phrases for the ARAMIS Crisis” (*Songs*, 352) which are all phrases that offer help and assistance—and big ones, such as Keelan’s and Owen’s striking sacrifices. Elliot’s and Sarah’s story-arcs particularly exemplify this ‘script rewriting’. *Songs* opens with a short enigmatic third person prologue that describes an intimidating offshore image of a drifting sailing boat facing a heavily guarded hospital on shore. This atmosphere of loneliness and violence is intensified by human violation of nature as the boat causes “a friction against the water’s flat expanse, a dissent against nature. Its mere presence creates resistance” (1). The sole person on board, a woman, is preoccupied with safeguarding the boat, seemingly soliloquizing for lack of company and “wait[ing] for her vision to adjust to the failing light” (1). The second last chapter (Chap. 16), however, re-perspectivizes the prologue’s gloomy and hopeless atmosphere. The woman on the boat is Sarah, alone on the boat with her son, after her co-sailor Owen abandoned their self-inflicted isolation on the offshore boat to rescue Noah and died from ARAMIS. While the prologue’s image of flight, isolation, and hostility seemingly exemplifies the prime safeguarding rule of a pandemic the novel pretends to spell out—“the best way to survive a plague is to be alone [...] go off somewhere away from other people” (120) according to Owen’s novel—it in fact shows Sarah setting sail to “turn around” (406) the boat, auspiciously named *Buona Fortuna*, and to rejoin the community she had left behind. Similarly, in a scene towards the end of the book, Elliot and Sarah, their parents, and Julia isolate in a remote cabin, mourning the lost past and the demise of normality, worrying about the current pandemic, the climate crisis, and the sense that “[e]verything is falling away” (381). In this atmosphere of “hopelessness,” “the terror of failing,” “the overwhelming grief for all of humanity’s missteps” (381), Elliot feels that he has been abandoning his duty and decides to return to the city,

because “[s]ociety is still worth protecting, don’t you think? Maybe now more than ever” (382).

Caring for others, turning to cooperation and community action, the acknowledgment of interrelations and complicated love relationships, and compassion and love for one’s own and other people’s children, simply by imagining a better future for them drives the novel. Watching her baby daughter sleep, Emma envisions a future for Blaze “playing with her cousins” (*Songs*, 350). “The imagination is very resilient” (Rogers 2020), Nawaz maintains. It may offer “escape, but sometimes it’s a way to dream up new futures” (Rogers 2020). For Emma, this vision of hope, of a future, and of community is “like a small seed of hope blowing in” (*Songs*, 350). In the wake of Stu’s death from ARAMIS, Emma, the “spiritual protagonist” (Nawaz qtd. in Yanchak 2020), writes her “Song for the End of the World” that becomes “the most streamed song in America” (*Songs*, 383) as people turn to the art of music as a beacon of hope. While the song laments the “last great extinction,” it pits love (universal or personal) against lingering despair. Notably, the book title, however, pluralizes Emma’s anthem in accordance with the character casts’ own life songs that similarly move between loss and slow hope.

In the end, hope is then not exclusively based on science, medications, immunization or vaccines, but on altruistic decisions and sacrifices, the readiness for change (captured in the leitmotif of the sailing boat), and the endurance of ambiguities. As Elliot intuits: “what would save them was already there [...] in their hearts, in every attempt to repair, cooperate [...]. Communicate. Connect” (417). Ultimately, Nawaz’s pandemic dystopia thus gives us “a moment of respite, insight, or hope” (*Songs*, 428) and casts a “pool of warm light in the darkness” (Wiersema 2020, n.p.). “We look to art,” the indie rock band declares in the novel, “to show us how we can survive the pain of this world” (*Songs*, 383). In isolation art becomes “a voice in the darkness [that] can reach out and save you from feeling alone” (384). We should listen attentively to this cacophony out of the dark, this excess of end times transfusing our realities from a fictional future, but then we should close the book, because, in the words of Kim Stanley Robinson, “[t]he end of the world is over. Now the *real* work begins” (2018, n.p.).

### **‘Slow Hope’ and the Remains of Civilization: Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven* (2015)**

Art also plays a fundamental role in Emily St. John Mandel’s postapocalyptic novel *Station Eleven*. The novel sets in with a spectacular end: On a snowy night, *King Lear* is being performed at the Elgin Theatre in Toronto. In act four, Arthur Leander, who enacts Lear, collapses on stage and dies of a heart attack. The mis-en-abyme play at the beginning foreshadows the apocalyptic catastrophe that is about to happen. When Arthur dies, people in the audience do not know yet that most of them will not survive the next 48 hours. During the theatre performance a deadly virus, a mutant of the swine flu, spreads with frantic speed and will eventually kill 99% of the world’s population.

Mandel's novel is told in an a-chronological and non-linear fashion. The plot has three different time levels and alternates between chapters that take place before the catastrophe, a few that depict the world right after the catastrophe and those that are set 20 years after the collapse. Unlike many other postapocalyptic novels, which focus on the aftermath right after the apocalypse and depict violence and the disintegration of society, Mandel's novel concentrates on the time in which the catastrophe has become the new normal, when new structures emerge, and when a new generation of people is born who have no knowledge of the world that has ended.

The main protagonist in the world after the catastrophe is Kirsten Raymond who was on stage with Arthur Leander when he died, playing a young version of Cordelia. Kirsten was eight when the world as she knew it ended. Mandel tells us very little about the violence and chaos that Kirsten must have experienced right after the collapse. That period is only hinted at by a scar Kirsten bears and a tattoo of two knives—emblematic of the fact that she had to kill two people in order to survive. In the chapters that take place 20 years after the catastrophe, Kirsten is a young woman of 28 and has joined a group of itinerant musicians and actors, the so-called travelling symphony, who tours the last remaining outposts of civilization and performs the plays of William Shakespeare. Besides 1% of humanity, it is Shakespeare's plays that have survived the end of the world.

The caravans of the travelling symphony—old trucks that, after the end of fossil fuel, are pulled by horses—are embellished by the motto "survival is insufficient." Derived from an episode of *Star Trek Voyager*, this sentence epitomizes the novel's central message.<sup>16</sup> Unlike many other post-pandemic novels, *Station Eleven* is not primarily concerned with physical survival but with the remains of humanity's humanness for which art plays a fundamental role. For Mandel, it is Shakespeare's plays that represent the essence of human history and of humanism, especially because they were also written during plague-ridden times.<sup>17</sup> One can by all means be critical of the fact that Mandel picks a white man, whose plays represent Eurocentrism and colonialism, as the safeguard for the survival of western cultural values (see Thurman 2015, 58; Smith 2016, 289; Méndez-García 2017, 115-16). One can also ask why the travelling symphony does not write and perform plays of their own if art and creativity are seen as the antidotes to the disintegration of civilization. In the logic of the novel, however, Shakespeare's plays are an important humanistic counterforce to the ideological appropriation of the catastrophe by the so-called prophet (De Cristofaro 2018, 8).

Hidden behind the figure of the prophet is Arthur's son Tyler—the son he has with his second wife Elizabeth Colton—who is as old as Kirsten when his father dies. As an adult Tyler gathers a group of believers around him who interpret the past pandemic as a divine apocalypse and claim that they will bring the light and show people who

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16 In this context, see Feldner 2018.

17 The plague or 'Black Death' made lockdowns and the closure of theatres necessary in Shakespeare's time, see Loiacono 2015.

follow them the road to salvation. In the figure of Tyler Mandel criticizes apocalyptic narratives, debunking them as ideological means to justify totalitarianism and violence. Tyler rules the group without mercy for any kind of contradiction, picks increasingly younger girls from the outposts that the group ravages and kills who does not obey and follow him. At the end of the book, Tyler, the prophet, is shot in a confrontation with the travelling symphony. While Mandel thus literally finishes off the apocalypse, her own narrative seems to be a search for new symbolic orders that are based on past narratives and structures without a salvific religious twist. Instead of religious redemption Mandel seeks out the archetypal stories of humanity as well as the innovative and creative spirit of mankind as the foundation for a new civilization.

True to Baumann's 'retrotopia' (2017), Mandel imagines a future which constitutes itself out of a remembrance of the past. The tone of the novel is elegiac; it nostalgically mourns the loss of technological achievements and societal structures that we took for granted. A telling example for this is the former airport of Michigan, a space which undergoes a significant semantic reinterpretation in the novel. While being stuck at an airport waiting for a departure flight is a normal event in our globalized world, the wait of the characters in *Station Eleven* has already lasted two decades. First, people realize that there will not be another flight, then that the National Guard will not come for their rescue and then they start looting the vending machines and restaurants at the airport. After that, the first people die because they lack medicine or go crazy. And then the situation at the airport becomes normal and new tentative orders are born out of necessity. People arrange themselves. Airplanes that were once used for transport now become coffins or homes. A school is founded and society differentiates itself into hunters and gatherers. And a decade after the collapse, the museum of civilization is founded at the Severn City Airport by Clark, Arthur's former friend and lawyer.

Through the museum and its objects, Clark wants to create a culture of remembrance that functions as an anchor for a future which defines itself via the past. He collects objects that have lost their original function, credit cards, passports, motorcycles, cell phones and computers that in a world without fuel, electricity, internet, and infrastructure have become useless. For the generation born after the collapse, these objects are either meaningless or obtain an "Eigensinn" as a thing.<sup>18</sup> For her aestheticization of objects Mandel has been accused of ignoring both the unfair conditions of their production and the supply chains of global capitalism (De Cristofaro 2018, 15; West 2018, 20). Pieter Vermeulen, however, has convincingly argued against this by pointing out that objects only attain beauty when they are looked at outside the context of their production and supply chains and when we become aware of their ephemeral nature (2018, 17-18). Mandel wants to make us aware of the finitude and fragility of things, technologies, and structures that modernity has achieved. One of those technical achievements, which is now missing, is electricity.

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18 On the "thingness of things" or "Eigensinn der Dinge" see Heidegger 2000.

Light is a recurring motif in Mandel's novel.<sup>19</sup> It literally stands for the technologized modern world and metaphorically for the Age of Enlightenment. When Tyler, the prophet, speaks of bringing people the light, he draws on eschatological discourses that lack any true enlightenment but that serve to enslave people to his will. When Kirsten, who is fascinated by electricity, longs for light, she longs for an enlightened world after the Dark Age (De Cristofaro 2018, 7). Electric light is time and again associated with beauty and order in *Station Eleven*.<sup>20</sup> At the end of the novel, the light cautiously returns on the horizon. Kirsten has reached the airport with the remaining members of the traveling symphony and from the airport's watchtower, together with Clark, observes a place in the distance which is again illuminated. What returns at the end of the novel is more than just light. It is hope for a new civilization.

Mandel has been accused of uncritically glorifying the very technology that has led to our current climate crisis (De Cristofaro 2018, 16-17). And indeed, electricity, just like all the things and structures of civilization that are now lost, is imbued with a certain magic in *Station Eleven*. It is as if Mandel wanted to reverse Max Weber's dictum of the disenchantment of the world since modernity and reenchant it, albeit without losing the social and technological advancements of modernity. In a truly romantic vein, Mandel finds the extraordinary in the ordinary and wants us to once again achieve a more affective bond to the naturecultural world surrounding us.<sup>21</sup> Her novel is less an apotheosis of the devastating effects of modern progress or an appeal to repeat past mistakes. Rather, it is a plea for a more mindfulness appreciation of the beauty of our world and for a more careful way of handling it so that we might have a chance for a second future.<sup>22</sup> Mandel's story can thus be very well read as an actualization of Mauch's call for narratives of "slow hope."

Postapocalyptic narrative often lend wings to our anxieties of the future. Literature creates hypothetical spaces in which we can probe and imagine possible outcomes. Mandel refuses to stick to a tale of negativity and instead of zombies, marauding bands and cannibals, paints a future in which despite aggravating circumstances the essence of civilization and of humanness cannot be entirely killed off but in which there remains a tiny beacon of slow hope.<sup>23</sup>

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19 The German translation of the novel is entitled *Das Licht der letzten Tage*. Transl. by Wibke Kuhn. München: Piper 2017.

20 For instance, when Arthur looks at the lights of L.A. from atop in what De Certeau (2010) has described as a bird's eye view of the city which allows us to temporarily transform the chaos of the city into a readable text.

21 This is something Mandel's novel shares with approaches in material ecocriticism that also want us to affectively reconnect with our environment. See, for instance, Bennett 2001 and 2010.

22 In several interviews Mandel has stated that she did not only want to write a novel about the end of the world and the demise of civilization but one about cautious new beginnings. See, for instance, McCarry 2014 and Griffith 2015.

23 On the idea of hope and utopia also see Leggatt 2018.

### **Memories from the Future in Catherine Mavrikakis's *Oscar de Profundis* (2016)**

While in Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* the light of hope flickers in an undefined post-apocalyptic future in which civilization must reinvent itself, it almost exclusively emanates from the sparse traces of a past world, which in Catherine Mavrikakis's *Oscar de Profundis* is subject to systematized oblivion in the context of a dystopian pandemic narrative set in the late 21<sup>st</sup> century. In a fictional future in which societies have turned away from the past, that is, from the present of the readers, and have alienated themselves from its cultural and socio-political achievements, the text proleptically demonstrates what readers are about to put at stake and what our present already contains as an almost natural inevitability: the apocalyptic moment that becomes reality in the dystopian future of the fictional text. Profoundly aware that a future completely detached from its past in signs and contents is not conceivable, that all futures presuppose a past, both texts, *Oscar de Profundis* and *Station Eleven*, exploit "the metaphor of the cultural bridge" from the past to the future as they clearly develop an "ethos of preservation" (Bergeron 2019, 102). Both Mavrikakis's and Mandel's texts thus echo Bauman's concept of 'retrotopia', "the Paradise of the past (as, probably, it is retrospectively imagined after it has been lost and fallen into ruins [...])" (2017, 2).

The novel's retrotopian perspective, however, is by no means committed to a merely nostalgic worldview, a yearning for the restoration of a mythical past and its elated cultural and aesthetic achievements. Rather, it invites us to reassess our present as a future past and, through the experience of loss in a dystopian future in which there is no longer any real collective awareness of the past, to better grasp our present's systemic logic and actual possibilities. In his short essay *Theory for the World to Come: Speculative Fiction and Apocalyptic Anthropology*, Matthew J. Wolf-Meyer considers speculative fiction in its various forms as a kind of social theory, which "capture[s] experiences of the world rather than determine[s] experiences of the world" (2019, 6). He insists on its heuristic function, which enables us to better imagine diversified agency not only in possible futures but also in the present. Ariel Kyrou and Yannick Rumpala put forward a similar idea by stressing that apocalyptic fiction in particular allows us to work through our fears (of loss) and possibly to convert them into creative energy:

[...] les fictions de fins du monde, ou plutôt de fin de notre monde, nous permettent de travailler nos peurs, même peut-être de les convertir en



espoirs et en pistes pour d'autres façons de vivre, autant pour les individus que pour leurs communautés et plus largement nos sociétés" (Kyrou/Rumpala 2019, 106).<sup>24</sup>

Mavrikakis's "memories from the future" as elaborated in *Oscar de Profundis*—Kyrou and Rumpala refer to the dystopian exercises of thought or experimental devices as "souvenirs du future" (2019, 106)—reflect these considerations and aim at reminding us of what we have at our disposal in the present, what we carelessly put at risk, and what in the present already points to the future. They also expose the attitudes and postures in which we please ourselves in the present and that prevent us from actively shaping the future beyond retrotopian complacency.

In *Oscar de Profundis* the author imagines a late 21<sup>st</sup> century Montréal afflicted, like the rest of the world, by climate crisis, pandemics, and the scarcity of resources, while its inhabitants, just as the entire global society, are alienated by surveillance and all-embracing digital manipulation. The two protagonists, Oscar Ashland and Cate Bérubé, find aesthetic consolation and political motivation in the cultures of the past. Their personal histories, however, were anything but Edenic—both figures look back on a complex past marked by traumatic experiences: The wealthy singer and global superstar Oscar Ashland, alias Oscar de Profundis, was born into a Montréal upper-class family. His younger brother was kidnapped and murdered as a child. Cate Bérubé, for her part, lives amongst the beggars of central Montréal. By some she is regarded as a former medical doctor who fell out of the system due to a medical malpractice; others think of her as a fugitive convict hiding in the city center's street canyons and underground tunnel system.

There are two things these otherwise very different characters have in common: They both speak several languages, some of which are already extinct or in the process of extinction—like their French mother tongue<sup>25</sup>—and they both possess an exceptional historical and Fine Arts knowledge, which is unusual for their time and links them to long-forgotten models of life. Language skills and erudition are not readily appreciated in the 'new democracy' of the "Gouvernement mondial" (cf. 28, 58). On the contrary, a quasi-dictatorship acting under the guise of democracy has been trying to systematically eradicate linguistic diversity for decades and favors the hybrid "sino-américain." Cate seems to be driven by a militant humanism, which she owes to the reading of leftist theories, the Paris Commune and the anarchists of the *Troisième République*, especially Louise Michel. She is inspired by societal visions which, in her eyes, still motivated political action at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and then lost

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24 "[...] the fictions of the end of the world, or rather of the end of our world, allow us to work on our fears, even perhaps to convert them into hopes and paths for other ways of living, as much for individuals as for their communities and more broadly our societies." (Transl. Doris Eibl)

25 One of the major concerns of this novel is undoubtedly the disappearance of the French language and Francophone culture in Montréal, which is only briefly hinted at here. On this subject see, e.g. Gélinas-Lemaire 2020.

their thrust. The passionate collector Oscar, on the other hand, identifies with another facet of the *fin de siècle*, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, namely its aestheticism or, more precisely, French aestheticism's most prominent literary incarnation, Des Esseintes, the decadent hero of Karl-Joris Huysmans novel *A rebours/Against the Grain* (1884). Oscar has Charles Baudelaire's sonnet "De profundis clamavi" tattooed on his back and spends his sleepless nights listening to Richard Wagner's *Parsifal* or drifting, oblivious of the world, in artificial paradises brought about by drugs and medications, which subsequently inspire his spectacular stage performances. Through her protagonists, Mavrikakis configures two retrotopian scenarios or phantasms which sometimes appear like memories of a reality that seems very immediate to the reader. However, only Oscar's retrotopian set finally endures, but, as the novel implies, even his collections might not last. The past, in whatever form, has been declared useless, even obstructive, to the progress of the World State's 'new democracy' (219).

In Mavrikakis's novel, which is laced with intertextual references and numerous insights into Montréal's cultural geography and history, Oscar's and Cate's paths cross only once and briefly, but in a most spectacular way, when Oscar comes to Montréal on his world tour. A few days before Oscar's concerts in the so-called Corona Hall (21), an epidemic breaks out. Despite some disturbing deaths, the concerts are not canceled because of pressure from the city's tourism lobby. While the eccentric Oscar, who has taken up residence with his entire entourage in the last inhabitable late-19<sup>th</sup>-century mansion in the city center, cannot leave after his concerts due to the rampant "black disease"—the city center is sealed off by the military—Cate decides to seize an unexpected opportunity to set an example: Helped by her closest confidants as well as Montréal's last bookseller, Adrian Monk, she kidnaps Oscar.

The protagonists not only have their education in common—which gives them an exceptional aura, albeit anachronistic in the narrated times of the late 21<sup>st</sup> century. They also share the conviction that they are moving towards the end of the world. Oscar belongs to the winners of the 'new democracy', in which the liberalist-right powers have closed all state institutions—except for the secret services—and have done everything possible to turn the citizens into ignorant consumers of the present (220). Oscar imagines the end as a planetary catastrophe and himself as a detached stoic observer of the end time to come. As such, he not only speaks, in his typical decadent attitude, of the "monotony of catastrophes" (131) but also compares himself to the character of Justine in Lars von Triers film *Melancholia* (2011): "Il se vit en Justine. Il sortit et décida de mourir en regardant la comète s'écraser sur la planète. Devant ce Malheur, il n'y avait d'autre choix que celui d'être curieux et d'accueillir l'apocalypse avec profondeur et distance" (139).<sup>26</sup>

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26 "He recognized himself in Justine. He went out and decided to die while he would watch the comet, which would hit the planet, approaching. In the face of this calamity, one had no choice but to be curious and greet the apocalypse with depth and distance." (Transl. Doris Eibl)

Cate's apocalyptic premonition lacks the possibility of the philosophical "depth and distance" Oscar claims for himself. Her foreboding springs, in fact, from the firsthand experience of being trapped in the virus-infested urban center of Montréal, where the military and police are struggling to isolate the 'human waste' produced by the turbo-capitalist system of the Global State from the privileged classes and, as it were, to dispose of it:

La maladie noire se présentait comme un fléau naturel, mais les traîne-misère comprenaient que, de toute évidence, le Gouvernement Mondial avait trouvé des moyens efficaces et sûrs de se débarrasser de sa vermine, sans que cela soulève la moindre indignation. [...] L'extermination des pauvres permettrait aux fortunés de s'appropriier les produits de la planète et de se débarrasser de tout sentiment de culpabilité. (Mavrikakis 2016, 51).<sup>27</sup>

Clearly, the author uses prolepsis and more specifically the topos of the pandemic with the intention of addressing humanitarian, cultural, and environmental catastrophes that are already smoldering or that are inherent in our present and threaten to become reality in the future. In the spatiotemporal freeze-frame of the quarantine and through the example of two hyperbolically drawn antipodal lives, she also imagines and studies human attitudes and behavior in extreme situations. She uses the exceptional situation of the pandemic to show that it exacerbates or sometimes radically reverses the habitus of each individual. Ultimately, she also raises the question of what leeway people have, especially in extreme situations, and what essentially determines their scope, focusing on global capitalism and its class antagonisms in the first place. When the author lets her protagonist Cate try for resistance, she opens a window to "slow hope" as she hints to possible microtransformations inspired by an alternative political knowledge that has been forgotten, even if the rebellious act as such finally fails.

However, one thing becomes clear from the very first pages of the novel: The epidemic does not affect everyone in the same way, or, to put it even more drastically, people do not suffer 'equally'. The virus is neither democratic nor class-blind. Oscar, who is usually driven by excessive desire for action, traveling the globe, saving valuable architecture from decay, collecting books, films, art, music recordings, and even mortal remains of great figures of the past, this Oscar de Profundis takes a wait-and-see position during the seven days of quarantine in Montréal. As the 'black disease' does not affect him directly, he becomes the passive observer par excellence. For Oscar, it is all a matter of sitting out the situation. So, while the disease rages in the city

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27 "The black disease presented itself as a natural scourge, but the draggers understood that the world government had obviously found effective and safe ways to get rid of its vermin without raising any indignation. [...] The extermination of the poor would allow the wealthy to appropriate the products of the planet and get rid of any sense of guilt." (Transl. Doris Eibl)

center and all around the mansion guarded by soldiers, and while armored bulldozers can hardly cope with the mountains of corpses, Oscar de Profundis allows himself some fresh air in the barricaded garden, watching the dog Ziggy Stardust romp around. Enjoying the first snow of the season, he quotes from Lucretius' *De rerum natura*:

[...] il lui était doux alors que la vaste mer était soulevée par les vents, d'assister du rivage à la détresse d'autrui ; non qu'il trouva un si grand plaisir à regarder souffrir ; mais il se plaisait à voir quels maux l'épargnaient. Il lui était doux aussi d'assister aux grandes luttes de la guerre, de suivre les batailles rangées dans les plaines, sans prendre sa part du danger" (Mavrikakis 2016, 205).<sup>28</sup>

For Cate and the amorphous mass of the poor and beggars, things are different, of course. They find themselves, *nolens volens*, in the middle of the epidemic, undernourished, at the mercy of the nearing winter and without any possibility of protecting themselves against the virus. At first, they search along the walls of the alleys for dry places to sleep, cursing and swearing, and finally, as they sleep, merge with the desolate cityscape. Soon the general mood tips over into delusional craziness and the rumor mill boils over. As more and more of them fall ill and perish miserably in a very short time, many are seized by some sort of frenzy and (self)destructive actionism, roaming the streets in groups, looting the stores in deserted downtown Montréal, feasting on the haul, drinking, partying. They turn a deaf ear to Cate's call to show solidarity and demand medical care. The daily struggle for sheer survival not only takes up all their time but has literally broken their will to make a difference. Nothing now seems more attractive to them than to seize the opportunity and dance to death at the apocalyptic ball in their *cour des miracles*, in their court of wonders.

Facing her own death, Cate wants at least to set an example by kidnapping the global superstar Oscar de Profundis. She deeply regrets that she did not organize the uprising more systematically and failed to put into action the knowledge gained from her readings of ancient political texts sooner. The kidnapping succeeds, but Oscar de Profundis is freed by the army of the global State just as quickly as he was kidnapped. Cate and her friends die in a hail of machine gun bullets. Only the bookseller, Adrian Monk, survives and later becomes a librarian in Oscar's private library. After all, Oscar, who suffers from insomnia, owes it to Adrian to have slept through the liberation, thanks to a very efficient narcotic Adrian gave him.

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28 "Tis sweet, when, down the mighty main, the winds // Roll up its waste of waters, from the land // To watch another's labouring anguish far, // Not that we joyously delight that man // Should thus be smitten, but because 'tis sweet // To mark what evils we ourselves be spared; // 'Tis sweet, again, to view the mighty strife // Of armies embattled yonder o'er the plains, // Ourselves no sharers in the peril; [...]" (Lucretius, transl. Leonard 1916).

In the twelve chapters of her novel, Mavrikakis unfolds not only two opposing characters in a dystopian setting, but also opposing social realities that are imprinted in the urban space of Montréal. From the very beginning, the fact that Oscar and not Cate would survive is part of the apocalyptic logic of the world the readers are confronted with in this speculative text, which unambiguously reflects their own present reality. Thus, as a kind of proleptic memory from the future, the novel not only casts its shadow on our time but also raises questions as to the form of decadence we want to live in, or questions similar to those Wolf-Meyer puts into play in *Theory for the World to Come*: What are

the rules that undergird a society [...] What are the systems of belief of these people (whoever they are), and how do they impact the everyday experience of identity categories like race, ethnicity, disability, gender, sexuality, and class? [...] What is the role of 'human nature,' and how does it impact people's relationships with nonhumans? What are the institutions that shape society and people's everyday lives? (Wolf-Meyer 2019, 5)

The novel also asks in what form and by whom our cultural "archives" are to be managed and taken care of, and whether our archives should really be entrusted to the ambitious dynamics of digital capitalism and to the Oscar de Profundis of this world.

Wolf-Meyer states that in many ways speculative fiction is not merely a game of 'what if' but that it challenges our "suburban complacency" and defies resignation (2019, 18). Even if this is not explicitly suggested and a melancholic or rather furiously melancholic tenor runs through *Oscar de Profundis*, Mavrikakis does definitely not resign and ultimately inscribes vision and hope into her text. It is therefore appropriate to say that the speculative text itself in its improbable probability is what could be called hope and what allows a reading of *Oscar de Profundis* from a "slow hope" perspective. While the protagonist's resistant ambitions and hopes are not fulfilled, her story still points us to what community and collective action make possible, how critical potential can be mobilized, and how solidarity makes a difference in any case.

### **Conclusion**

Despite their temporal differences, the three dystopian narratives analyzed in more detail in this article strike the same chord: They not only create pandemic scenarios and analyze human behavior in extreme situations far beyond anything we allow ourselves to imagine for real life, but their futures remind us of the values of our present and focus on humanity as well as humanity's will to survive in the midst of catastrophe. The novels consider desolation and its aftermaths and are fueled by an undercurrent of despair, but, paradoxically, from despair that also generates the energy to live on and resist. All three turn to art as an indispensable part of human life, as a foil for reflection on the pain of the world, and as a source of inspiration for creative and

courageous action. While Mandel and Mavrikakis turn to the archives of art to summon a lost, yet seemingly desirable careless, but at long last disruptive, past, Nawaz emphasizes the healing power of collectively shared art that links individuals across distance and despair. All three novels enact a form of “slow hope,” “identify[ing] starting points and signposts that can direct us into an alternative future” (Mauch 2019, 3). These “subversive [...] counter-stories” (38) draw “empowering hope” from crisis as the portal of change, happening “not overnight, but slowly, sometimes invisibly and often against all odds” (36). In all three novels, the fundamental things and ideas we need to actually conceive change and reinvent ourselves in sustainable ways are within our reach: alternative social and political theories, art and literature, altruism and solidarity, to name just a few. To allow the small seed of hope blowing into our world, we need to imagine and tell stories about survival, about communities and care, about the beauty of small things. Speaking to the present ‘language of fear’ from the proleptic position of an imaginary future, these novels inject their narratives with a language of slow hope that transmits into our present. In response to the current Covid-19 pandemic, Arundhati Roy (2020) has referred to the pandemic as a “portal” and a “gateway” between the present world and the future, a before and an after. These novels broadcast from the other side of the portal. Slow hope is choice and action, or, in Roy’s words:

We can choose to walk through it [the pandemic portal], dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. (Roy 2020, n.p.)

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