

Guest Editorial

Apocalyptic Pedagogies: Rethinking Publics and Publicness in the Time of Apocalypse

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Twenty-thousand years of this, seven more to go. – Bo Burnham, Inside

In an August, 2010 Reuters report (Zabarenko, 2010), Terry Hazen, an ecologist from Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, announced that the Manhattan-sized oil plume resulting from the Deepwater Horizon spill had been at least half consumed by oceanic microbes. Later reports (Borenstein, 2010) also noted that these microbes were not, as many feared, creating oxygen-deprived “dead spots” in which other sea life would struggle to survive. In other words, it was as if the spill never happened—BP had hit what Steve Murawski, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration senior scientist, called “the sweet spot” (Borenstein, 2010, ¶6). Mere months following the report of these results (Borenstein, 2011), however, researchers observed large deposits of oil, methane, and soot from burn off attempts still smothering the gulf floor and presenting a colossal threat to the viability of that ecosystem, refuting the once-magical microbe story. For the purposes of this editorial, however, our wish is to resurrect the heroic narrative, in some fashion, of the gulf microbes. Within the piece, we return to these microbes not as biological constructs, but as psychic ones—manifestations of the extant formal and public pedagogies of the mid-apocalyptic¹ present, an educative species of wish fulfillment itself.

Deepwater Horizon was, at the time of its occurrence, a major ecological crisis—one that found its way into much of the American public media as a sign of the deep wounds we continue to carve into this world. On our screens, coastal birds were washed in Dawn soap, interactive images of the Gulf Coast’s dire erosion were created, and the sentiment of

change laced its way into award acceptance speeches and somber-scored commercials. And, then, as if consumed by microbes itself, the crisis vanished—from headlines, from consciousness, from that whisper of *change*. Collectively, our psychic energies had been drawn to the next catastrophe—the next *lone nut* opening fire on unsuspecting children, the next mass death of bees to be ameliorated with robotic replacements, the next natural disaster to seemingly target the world’s most vulnerable, the next wildfire to litter the landscape with corpses, the inevitable saber rattling of sociopathic lords and masters who have never experienced a consequence. Back and forth—trauma and forgetting—in the rhythm of a lullaby, visions of murder hornets dancing in our heads. And then, COVID-19: the news story that would outlive its news cycle to actually affect daily life, the virus no microbe could swallow, no matter how magical. Speaking from a decidedly U.S. perspective, we would try to erase it, using seemingly every known tactic: minimization, gaslighting, misdirection, blameshifting, scapegoating, sunlight, bleach, horse deworming medication, anti-vaccination and anti-mask sentiment, ANTIFA, Jewish space lasers. None of it had the capacity to change the story, because we had finally encountered something that would inconvenience the flow of power and privilege. For the United States in particular—a nation in love with its excesses—COVID-19 was too much. Nothing could evidence this more than the armed siege of Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer’s office, with one espoused demand being to end the lockdown so that citizens might be able to return to barber shops. Lingering on an event, particularly when that event places limits on white licentiousness, is, apparently, tantamount to treason.

The Ruins of the Present: Mid-Apocalyptic Space and the Pandemic

Frederic Jameson (2003) has said that we are more capable of imagining the end of the world than we are the end of capitalism, a statement that is given some credence by the proliferation of filmic and prosaic representations of the end; the proliferation of neoliberal environmental, cultural, and economic policy, free of the burdens of ethics or futurity; and the very messaging of the aforementioned Michigan siege-makers, as the known of the virus could not outweigh the decidedly unknown of closed restaurants and unkempt hair. In Jameson’s binary, we are presented, at the core of the statement, with the difference between knowable and unknowable discourses. In the case of apocalypse, the landscape of the known and the possible exists in figurations of the Holocaust, historical memories of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, the encompassing dread of the Cold War, and the already-overwhelming environmental evidence of industrialization’s cost. These are the scenes that continue to return in fictionalized, sensationalist, and even heroic narratives, detaching them from their historical significance and modern import. In the case of capitalism, however, it is the trauma of the unknown, the unknowable outside of the economic system that governs, orients, and aligns our identities and collective destinies that allows it to be unthought. Our very lack of language to assail capitalism in anything but its symptomatic manifestations undergirds its very ability to elude sustained criticism, let alone proposals for traversing the fantasmic space it creates. Furthermore, and perhaps more crucial to unpacking Jameson’s suggestion, understanding either apocalypse or capitalism requires a critical meditation on the two concepts’ reciprocity. Kahn (2010a, 2010b) details the role of late capitalist and neoliberal policy in the parasitic enervation that has decimated ecologies and created much of the current environmental crisis. Sandlin (2010), in her research on Reverend Billy, an anti-consumer performance artist/activist, has taken up the term “shopocalypse” to signify the convergence of rampant consumerism and the deleterious toll it has taken on the social and physical environments we occupy.

These approaches posit the relationship of economic life to apocalyptic ends in somewhat unidirectional, causal means, with apocalypse as a result of the rise of capitalist and consumerist drives and the fall of environmental standards in their wake. Other theorists, however—such as Jameson (1991), Baudrillard (1987), James Berger (1999), and within education, Karen Anijar (n.d.)—have suggested that the inverse is also true: that late capitalism, and its radical annihilation of meaning, is possible due to our existence in post-apocalyptic—or as we term them, mid-apocalyptic—times. We have already experienced the *grande morte*, the death of meaning as a modernist project, as well as the attendant historical trauma of these events. From a Freudian (1961) perspective, despite any cohesion and placidity we experience in our social order, we bear the repressed memories of the world's end in the narratives, images, and indivisible remainders of seemingly endless genocides, the atomic bomb, the rise of nuclear armament that characterized the latter half of the 20th century, and the waves of extinction and suffering promised to arrive as the oceans' temperature rises. These moments serve as pedagogies of subjectivity itself, master signifiers (Bracher, 1993; Lacan, 1981) that organize our social relationships and identity constructs around a world that could—in an ostensible flash of light—disappear.

Informing the environmentalist node of apocalyptic life, Baudrillard (1987) and Jameson (1991) have also argued that the end of modernist grand narratives and meaning as a trope come from the widespread advent and viral promulgation of post-industrial and, subsequently, late capitalist social and economic configurations. Linking the ever-pressing mantra of expansion that characterizes capitalist ideology to the metastasization of cancer cells, Baudrillard claims that “we are no longer in a state of growth; we are in a state of excess. We are living in a society of excrescence, meaning that which incessantly develops without being measurable against its own objectives” (p. 29). For Baudrillard, the meaninglessness of capitalism and its rampant burrowing into social space is anathema to any sense of coherence beyond the immediacy and ultimately unsatisfying moment of pleasure in purchase. Baudrillard's arguments suggest that any search for meaning is a dead end, as under postmodern/late capitalist times, meaning has been replaced with endless chains of signification, reproductions of reproductions. Flickering across our collective screens, each sign of the end becomes its own flash of light, its own end times, fading from consciousness as the next rises.

And, perhaps, this is how we secretly want it. Repetition in this fashion has a crucial function within discourses like psychoanalysis—it is the key feature of a symptom, a psycho-material event that, when *enjoyed* (Zizek, 2008), affords temporary reprieve from the wages of our trauma (De Kesel, 2009; Lacan, 1997; Verhaeghe and Declercq, 2002). From our purview, living life along these chains of symptoms is the nature of life in the apocalyptic boil of capitalism. We are given image after image of the end, buffered by those precious pauses between; the flicker that fractures the (w)hole and that denies—pleasurably—our capacity to see this totalizing miasma as connected, as a process that—perhaps irreversibly—culminates in extinction. In the post-Trump, post-truth, post-reality world, hidden behind the tireless, microbe-eaten strobe of staccato catastrophe, capitalism remains hidden in unimaginable perpetuity. Until COVID-19.

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic survived every metaphoric microbe we could personally, culturally, neurotically, and pedagogically muster. COVID-19's apocalyptic tenor became the unflinching noise that denied us the pleasure of scratching our apocalyptic itch and enjoying (Zizek, 2008) symptomatic repetition. Instead, COVID-19 forced a slowness to media cycles, with a running death toll that still refuses to give its final tally and the command to stop enjoying the world *as usual*. In this slowness, we saw the light of the viral apocalypse shine on racism, on ecology, on inequity, on tyranny, and on our complicity in failing to see how all of it was already the end of the world. Perhaps the apocalypse itself is the uber-microbe—the

final release, a consequence for the Anthropocene's selfish actions, the punctuation on a run-on era.

Unveilings

Each of the pieces in this special issue take up this idea of the apocalypse, in different ways. Some focus on the various social, economic, health, political, and racial disparities that have been revealed by the multiple pandemics, including COVID-19, human-created climate change and its resulting environmental devastation. Other contributions focus on how individuals and communities are responding to these various apocalyptic experiences. And other papers focus on how to survive these various apocalyptic pandemics through focusing on how creative arts practices and artistic public pedagogies can help us envision and re-create more just communities and institutions.

Deborah Madden, Pat Drake, and Sara Clifford, in their contribution, *Apocalyptic Temporalities and Re-Setting the Future: Using Creative Pedagogies to Explore Everyday Cultures of Grief During Pandemic Times*, reflect on a collaborative oral history and creative arts project that raised questions about how to study past (Spanish Flu) and present (COVID-19) pandemics in ways that see the pandemic(s) as an 'unveiling' rather than as the populist or nationalistic 'disjuncture'. Using the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918 as a heuristic device, the authors collected reflexive oral histories from palliative care clinicians and practitioners in the UK to understand processes of grief and emotional responses to COVID-19, which were then used to create creative arts projects. In this piece they reflect on how creative arts projects, creative pedagogies, and collaborative research can facilitate the conceptualization of the pandemic as a portal into thinking and creating a radically different future via a pedagogy of the possible.

In our contribution, *Into the UpsideDown: Conspiracy Pedagogies, Critique, and the Apocalypse of Exposure*, we (**Jake Burdick and Jennifer Sandlin**) explore one phenomenon that was 'exposed' by the ongoing multiple apocalyptic pandemics of COVID-19, Trumpism, racism, science denialism, and misinformation: QAnon. In our paper we examine the limits of the concept and practice of 'exposure' by exploring how QAnon adherents share many processes and practices with critical theory-oriented academics. We employ the metaphor of the "UpsideDown"—taken from the television show *Stranger Things*—to analyze how QAnon creates inverse, even perverse, versions of the academic discourses and practices of critical media literacy, critical thinking, feminism, and more. We end by asking "what is to be done", where we argue that we should look for pedagogies that lie outside of the "critical thinking" mantra, specifically those currently being enacted by artists, activists, and journalists.

In his piece, *Shades of Becoming Toward Regenerative Futures: Revelatory Purposes and Process in Sustainability Education and Public Pedagogy*, **Jordan King** focuses on our current apocalyptic era, one in which we are currently struggling with COVID-19, social injustice, and climate change. King posits that our current existential situation is deeply unsustainable and is in need of adaptation, healing, and evolution. This situation also prompts new pedagogies for learning that can help us envision and create regenerative futures. Writing from the perspective of sustainability education, King explores how the fields of sustainability education and public pedagogy can learn from each other in order to forward pedagogies of regeneration. He presents a theoretical framework that uses the metaphor of 'shades of becoming' (un-becoming, re-becoming, and becoming) to help educators envision new pedagogies that can help navigate and negotiate apocalyptic challenges.

Jayson Cooper's contribution is titled *Re-membering Publicness*. In this multimodal text, using images and sound, Cooper addresses the long and ongoing apocalypse of colonialism. In this piece he critiques colonial processes of ownership through exploring the colonial

narratives, historical naming practices, and land colonization of one small seasonal creek in western Wurundjeri Country, Narrm (St Albans, Melbourne). Cooper takes up practices of “Storying Country” in order to reveal, disrupt, and refuse the ways in which the colonial project historically and currently distorts natural ecological and cultural systems as it enacts public pedagogies of forgetting, erasure, and displacement. In this piece Cooper revisits and re-members the seasonal creek, engaging with the ghosts and hauntings of Place. He provides for the reader photographs, poetry, and music that represent his process of decolonising discourses in and of this public sphere, and his experience of walking alongside Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing.

Erin Rondeau-Madrid, in her paper, *In the Midst of Madness: Mental Health Literacy as Null to Explicit Curriculum in Public Spaces*, focuses on how, during the COVID-19 pandemic, public agencies, news media, and corporations in the United States have increasingly played the role of public pedagogue, teaching the public about mental health and promoting mental health literacy. She problematizes how mental health literacy has moved from implicit null curriculum to explicit curriculum, exploring both the problems and possibilities of political institutions, corporations, and news media playing the role of educator about mental health within a neoliberal system that routinely ignores the needs of vulnerable populations most affected by inadequate mental health support services.

Debbie Qadri’s contribution, *What’s Bad About Spoonvilles?: Investigating Pedagogies of Kindness and Connection Through Community-Engaged Art Projects in Public Space*, focuses on the phenomenon of spoonvilles—little villages of decorated wooden spoons placed in the ground—that emerged in the United States, UK, and Australia during the lockdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic. She explores the problems and possibilities of these forms of public art and asks questions about what kinds of publics they facilitated, and how they created communities that both included and excluded members. Qadri explicates how the spoonvilles fostered support and participation in some community members while inspiring others to destroy them—she posits that spoonvilles disrupt the regular order of the use of public space and call into question who can contribute to art in public space. She argues that both the creation and destruction of spoonvilles help reveal how power relationships work in public spaces.

In their contribution, *Urban Pedagogies of Resistance in Apocalyptic Hong Kong*, **Kelly Kailai Chan**, **Jaz Hee-jeong Choi**, and **Daniel Harris**, explore how activists and artists in what they call “Apocalyptic Hong Kong” have responded to Hong Kong’s surveillance society that has been developing and intensifying since the 2014 Occupy/Umbrella Movement, the 2019 protest against the proposed bill to allow extradition to mainland China, and the advent of COVID-19 restrictions on movement and civil rights. In this piece they trace the history of Hong Kong’s surveillance society and discuss activist responses to it, specifically focusing on two cases of artistic interventions/interruptions—the Hong Kong Way (August 2019) and #Hijack Art Basel HK (May 2021). Using the concept of the “undercommons”, they explore how public pedagogy at the intersection of art and public protest practices in Hong Kong are helping to create pedagogies in the interest of publicness.

Mark Harvey situates his piece *Public Rāhui and Road Blocks in Aotearoa: Navigating Iwi/Hapū Perspectives and Mana Motuhake*, in the middle of two ongoing apocalypses—the ecological disaster we are witnessing across the globe, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Writing from the Aotearoa/New Zealand context, he explores the public debates that have arisen during COVID-19 over restrictions on public access—including checkpoints set up by iwi/hapu in several rural areas—to regional conservation forests placed by Te Kawerau ā Maki iwi of Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland to stop the spread of both COVID-19 and the ecological pest kauri dieback by visitors. In this article Harvey analyzes and reflects on how various

members of the public opposed these bans; this analysis discusses how public opposition revealed aspects of settler politics, discourses of rights and freedoms, and white supremacy. In this piece Harvey takes up Linda Tuhiwai Smith's call to decolonise research through forwarding views of iwi/hapu and highlighting perspectives of mana motuhake (authority, self-determination and agency), alongside Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Māori perspectives of the Treaty of Waitangi) and mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge).

Janelle Grant, in her *Liberating Curriculum: A Pedagogy of Publicness that Counters Dominant Culture*, explores the connections between public pedagogy and mass incarceration, examining various public narratives about mass incarceration that are categorized as post-apocalypse, mid-apocalypse, and counter-apocalypse, depending upon how they conceptualize the current state of society. Grant examines the Liberation Arts Project (LAP), a Black-led art program founded and run by currently incarcerated people, as an example of a counter-apocalyptic pedagogy that unveils, reveals, and exhibits the ongoing social catastrophe of mass incarceration. She uses the LAP as a case study to explore how creative pedagogies can counter dominant narratives about mass incarceration that deny, ignore, and hide social traumas surrounding racialized discipline. LAP, instead, provides space to ignite the imagination of audience members, helping them envision and enact a more caring world.

Bindi MacGill's contribution, *Apocalyptic Pedagogies: Rethinking Publics and Publicness in the Time of Apocalypse*, is a photo essay of images taken on her home on Kangaroo Island, where fires described by many locals and in worldwide news as 'apocalyptic' destroyed half the island in 2019. MacGill threads the theme of *confusion* throughout this article's text and images, exploring and depicting a land ethics of care, apocalyptic environmental events, and the emergence of traumatised communities. Such communities are learning to survive through co-dependence and co-creation, enacting hopefulness through acting, together. MacGill's photographs are her attempt to stay in the present and enact a posthumanist ethics of care. The photographs and essay also forward the power of local people, publicness, and their associated pedagogies to define and co-create solutions to ecological disasters, while simultaneously revealing the woefully inadequate response of the State to define and fix ecological problems.

In **Karen Charman** and **Mary Dixon's** article, *The Ephemeral Public*, they focus on how the COVID-19 pandemic created a form of public they call "ephemeral", explore what pedagogical encounters look like in and for such a public, and explicate a kind of pedagogue they deem the "educative agent," who lies outside of typical definitions of who is considered a public pedagogue. Charman and Dixon explore how pandemic lockdowns in Melbourne created ephemeral publics as people fleetingly came together and dispersed as they navigated the rules set forth by government and health authorities. Educative agents emerged in these ephemeral publics in the form of drawings on sidewalks and fences, objects such as spoon-villes, and fleeting encounters between people walking in neighborhoods. Charman and Dixon explore how these agents created public pedagogical encounters in the pandemic as they addressed the public, and how these encounters constituted an authority and circulated knowledge within these fleeing public realms.

Collectively, we posit these pieces as a different way to *use* the end of the world. In this volume, we take a moment in the *slow end times* to wonder what else might come to be after this world has ended. As we noted in our call for the issue, apocalypse's etymology signifies an unveiling, a revelation of something hidden, and within this journal, we see prescient moves toward that unveiling. Finally, we hope that our *play* within these tropes—and their material meanings and consequences—is seen neither as morbid nor as flippant in the face of actual horror. On the contrary, we feel that this space—the end of meaning as we know it—is the space for cultural production, of the birth of responsive and ethical publics and

counter-publics, and of courageously finding out what the end of capital might be. This is our hope for something else.

Jake and Jenny, October, 2021

Notes

1. This is a term we take up to reject the language of the “post” apocalyptic, as we see apocalypse as a process, rather than an event. Moreover, this is a process that we find to be well underway, given scientific, cultural, and political reason. See also Alenka Zupančič’s *The Apocalypse is (Still) Disappointing* (2017) for another take on the notion of mid-apocalyptic cultural life.

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