MEMORY STUDIES

Closure in dystopia: Projecting memories of the end of crises in speculative fiction

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Abstract

In this piece, I approach the relationship between the paradigm of imbricated crises pertaining to the second decade of the twenty-first century and its contemporaneous dystopian literature. I focus particularly on how dystopian literature forges a sense of closure that attempts to give meaning through the construction of imaginary memories of how crises came and went, or came and stayed. Dystopian tales provide the troubled reader of its time with a sense of narrative continuation and a substitute for closure. For my analysis, I draw on a corpus of literary works from around the world, which includes *The Queue*, by Basma Abdel Aziz; *Station Eleven*, by Emily St John Mandel; *The Emissary*, by Tawada Yōko; *Severance: A Novel*, by Ling Ma; *China Dream*, by Ma Jian; *Ansibles, Profilers and Other Machines of Wonder*, by Andrea Chapela; and *The Ministry for the Future*, by Kim Stanley Robinson.

Keywords

closure, crisis, dystopian literature, intersectionality, memory, 2010s

Introduction

In this article, I explore the relationship between contemporary crises and dystopian fiction produced in the past decade, looking in particular at the articulation of memory as a narrative device. I pay special attention to how dystopian literature casts a sense of closure that tries to provide an interpretation to ongoing emergencies and, in some cases, potential imaginary pathways for their solution. I argue that the past 10 years have seen the rise of dystopian fiction that is politically conscious of current challenges but, instead of succumbing to dread and nihilism as most canonic classic dystopias, these works offer instead channels for emotional and even material resolutions.

This shift is relatively recent and evidences the vitality that has characterized the genre since the turn of the century. Dystopian fiction of the late 2000s, which featured predominantly the boom of the zombie apocalypse and the messianic survivor of Young Adult (YA) sagas like *The Hunger Games* (Ames, 2013; Drezner, 2014), have also been interpreted as a response to social malaises. However, autarky, self-reliance, and a Hobbesian reading of the inherent selfishness of human

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beings have been their main underlying proposal. I argue, however, that this paradigm has been changing in the past decade. Dystopian fiction has turned toward embracing the power of a politics of care, community solutions, and it even proposes auspicious futures in what can be described as hopeful dystopias, borrowing the term from Carmen Méndez-García (2017: 113). Strikingly, it is not that there are more reasons to be optimistic now than there were 10 years ago. If anything, crises have intensified: the effects of climate change keep building up, political disaffection and dangerous populism have gone rampant in democratic and non-democratic states, economic inequalities and the gap between poor and wealthy keeps expanding, increased awareness of the systemic entrenchment of gender and racial violences has led to mass mobilizations across the globe, and, on top of everything, the turn of the decade was met by the advent of the continuing COVID-19 pandemic. How is it that dystopias are moving toward embracing some sense of hope instead of continuing the trend of nihilistic cynicism of their immediate predecessors?

In this piece, I propose that at least a part of the answer that explains this process relies on the way contemporary dystopian fiction narrates time and memory, particularly, how this literary device articulates a sense of an ending to our current predicaments. I argue that this suggestion of closure is linked to an understanding of crises not as independent problems, but as systemic issues. They require a response from the community, empowering the idea of collective agency instead of relying on the lone survivor of previously canonic dystopias. These fictions employ the narrative nature of cultural memory to formulate potential, imaginary routes toward an end of crises or, at least, an end to our current stage of multilevel crises. Memory becomes a powerful tool for the critical analysis of our present and different futures, but as I show in my study, these works acknowledge its problematic, non-straightforward display of time through the employment of derived devices such as nostalgia or amnesia.

I choose to approach my analysis by drawing a pool of selected works of dystopian fiction published in the past 10 years. The criteria that I followed to choose these works, besides literary significance, is that each text must engage with one or multiple ongoing crises and deal with the question of how memory ventures or problematizes a sense of narrative closure. Furthermore, I have tried to include works from different cultural traditions in an effort to keep decolonizing our systems of knowledge production and canonization. According to these conditions, I picked *Al-Tabuur* (*The Queue*), by Basma Abdel Aziz (2016 (2013)); *Station Eleven*, by Emily St John Mandel (2014); *Kentōshi* (*The Emissary*), by Tawada Yōko (2018 [2014]); *Severance: A Novel*, by Ling Ma (2018); *Zhongguo Meng* (*China Dream*), by Ma Jian (2018); *Ansibles, perfiladores y otras máquinas de ingenio* (*Ansibles*, *Profilers and Other Machines of Wonder*), by Andrea Chapela (2020); and *The Ministry for the Future*, by Kim Stanley Robinson (2020). For this article, I will work with the English translations of Abdel Aziz, Tawada, and Ma's novels. Chapela's collection of short stories is yet to be published outside of its original in Spanish.

I have decided to organize my analysis around how contemporary dystopian literature engages with the relationship between memory and crises. I hypothesize that contemporary dystopias take on crises by articulating memories of the present and future and creating in the process a sense of closure. All these texts identify the second decade of the twenty-first century as a point of departure of their diegetic historical narrative. Our present moment becomes the "past" in their different diegetic futures. The key difference between the timeframes of these texts lies in how far away from this present each dystopian tale dares to venture in its construction of a memory of time passed. Therefore, I have grouped the works according to the distance from this shared present into three categories: dystopias of the immediate future, dystopias of the middle-term future, and dystopias of a long-term future. This differentiation is based on the understanding that one of the main conflicts between memory and history is the clash between individual recollections and the public articulation of a group's past. The difference between generations that live a moment of pre- and

post-crisis has an impact on the way memory is handled and transmitted. Dystopias set in the near future depict a generation that has memories of a time before the predicament, so trauma and memory suppression feature more heavily in these diegetic settings. Literature that shows in coexistence a generation that experienced a pre-dystopian world and a generation that only has memories of the new paradigm play up the conflict between adaptation and nostalgia. Dystopias of a far future need to account for the management of memories that have turned history through chronicling and the decline or passing of generations that can remember that time. I use this criterion to explore the different ways in which memory is treated in the genre and how it has an impact on the way closure to crises is articulated.

On dystopia, crises, and memory

While it is possible to find preceding examples and pioneering works of utopian fiction leading up to the twentieth century, it is particularly running up to World War II and accounting for its aftermath that dystopia breaks into literary history, particularly Western literature. According to the chronology traced by Baccolini and Moylan (2003), these are the years that saw the genesis of what is now considered as canonical of classical dystopias, works like Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, Yevgeney Zamyatin's *We*, or George Orwell's *1984*. The main trait of classical dystopias is the projection of a bleak, hopeless future where humanity in its social and individual dimensions has been reduced and subdued to powers that diminished or corrupted their free will. Dystopian fiction acted in the decades that followed the end of the war as a way for artists and intellectuals to articulate their fears and distrust of totalitarian regimes and the dangers of modernity. This dreary conception of the future peaked in the early 1960s when counter-culture ecologist and feminist movements fueled a desire to revisit utopianism, but this time incorporating a sense of critical understanding of the concept of utopia (see, for instance, Ursula K Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*). Disaffection with utopian social dreaming arose during the 1980s and the rise of the new neoliberal order. Dystopian fiction emerged first as cyberpunk narratives (William Gibson's *Neuromancer*) to then incorporate fears and denunciations informed by questions of gender (Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*) or race (Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*). Mirroring the changes in the conception of utopian fiction, these tales have been described as critical dystopias (Baccolini and Moylan, 2003: 7).

The main trait of critical dystopias is their desire to engage with ongoing conflicts by imagining a parallel present or a potential future where the consequences of today's ills provoke an undesired outcome for society. They share with classical dystopias their nature as cautionary tales, but as Farca and Ladevèze (2016) point out, their main difference is that a critical dystopia "leaves its diegetic characters room for contestation and revolt against the dystopian regime" (p. 3). The incorporation of chances for opposition becomes essential in the evolution of critical dystopias at the turn of the century and for the past two decades. Dystopias are narratives that imagine a ghastly scenario for humanity, but these fictions stand essentially against teleological determination. Dystopias offer us a world that, in its spoiled state, exposes imperfection and, therefore, room for change and improvement. Dystopias, as Sargent (1975: 138) argues, should not be mistaken for anti-utopias, namely, fictions that try to prove that utopian societies are impossible to achieve. Dystopian scenarios are imagined deficiencies, and what has changed in the evolution of the genre is our capacity to imagine ways to avoid, amend, or transform their frightful settings.

I defend that, nowadays, it is as important to acknowledge that dystopias offer criticism of their contemporary crises as to recognize that they also provide resources for dealing with them by bestowing different degrees of agency to their diegetic characters. Aaron S Rosenfeld explores how the setting, conflict, and conventions of dystopias shape their protagonists and the way

comprehending these characters improves our understanding of dystopias as an evolving genre. The question of agency appears central in the forming of the dystopian character. Classical dystopias propose a protagonist who is the sole source of tension between a world the reader recognizes as oppressive and a diegetic reality that bears with it (Rosenfeld, 2021: 42). In unfolding a plot that eventually leads to the main character's failure to subvert this repressive status quo, Rosenfeld (2021) points out how characters lose instead of gain capacity to inflict change throughout the novel; in his words, the character ends up "as an infant . . . from more to less agency, more to less interiority" (p. 112). While I agree with Rosenfeld (2021) in his reconstruction of the dystopian character for classical dystopias and early critical dystopias, I disagree with his view that "dystopias are particularly invested in offering the average reader . . . a pleasure in endings that is profoundly escapist" (p. 232) and that "dystopian novels are also experiments in dismissing questions of politics entirely" (Rosenfeld, 2021: 233). I believe these readings could be appropriate only if we stopped considering the evolution of dystopias experienced in the past years.

Rosenfeld's views seem based on his accurate interpretation of the late 2000s and early 2010s surge of apocalyptic and YA dystopian fiction. These strands of dystopian narratives appear suggestive and even potentially hopeful at the surface level. On one hand, apocalyptic dystopias present a civilization that needs to be rebuilt, disclosing the chance for designing a better world. However, not only are these efforts truncated by a cynical view of human nature, they also rely heavily on the construction of (in Rosenfeld's words) "Nietzschean heroes": larger-than-life characters that propose faux ethical dilemmas in a context of total survival that pave the way for means that always justify the end (Rosenfeld, 2021: 68). Even when these apocalyptic dystopias depict a group of survivors, the figure of the leader is a mandatory archetype, a messianic figure whose gravitas becomes the central and indispensable source for plot advancement and resolution. Similarly, YA dystopias present conflicts that in appearance hold the potential for change and agency. They customarily introduce a charismatic teen rebel that fights against an oppressive system in a quest that is both a confrontation of adult values and a rejection of shared co-responsibility. Apocalyptic fiction and YA dystopian novels end up promoting reactionary, individualist, and escapist interpretations of how we should react to crises (Bradford et al., 2008: 29; Hanson, 2020: 107). This tendency has been recently contested and, as I explore in my analysis, dystopias of the past 10 years have moved to embrace agency in communities, social mobilization, and politics of care that is less reliant on *übermensch* protagonists, to the point of even mocking them.

Dystopias have been concerned from the very beginning with the relationship between, on one hand, narration and memory, and, on the other, history and memory. Regarding the first relationship, I just want to mention a few key definitions that inform my understanding. Richard Terdiman (1993) has studied the way the process of remembering, instead of reifying a clear distinction between the past as the time of the remembered action and the present as the time of recollection, erases the chronological line. The act of remembering is an act of presentiality in which the past is rendered through the needs, hopes, and biases of the present. The past is invented in the present, but the present is also invented by the influence of this conceived past. Ernst Bloch and Herbert Marcuse have highlighted the capacity of memory, in particular, the individual faculty of rendering memories, as allowing us to envision a future (Hanson, 2020: xv). We can imagine what is to come because we can narrate what has already occurred. Narrating memories is therefore an act that invents the past, the present, and the future.

This process of memory creation is, as Maurice Halbwachs (1992) points out, not an act exclusive of the individual but dependent on the collective. This process, however, means that history emerges from the grave of individual and collective memories, signaling an inherent tension between the two that has been the main concern of thinkers like Pierre Nora (1989) or Andreas Huyssen (2003). At the core of these disputes is the control over a group's narrative, which means

the administration of what is remembered and what is forgotten: the management of amnesia. Once history has supplanted memory in the social sphere, the control of history becomes the control of memory, which is ultimately an individual act, and in Foucaultian interpretation of this paradigm, it implies the control—to an extent—of the individual process of past, present, and future creation. Dystopias expose both the potential for conflict and hope of individual and cultural memories. The power of public overseeing of memories and historical revisionism as a tool for control and domination is greatly explored, particularly in classic dystopias such as *1984*. However, I am more interested in exploring the way contemporary dystopias chronicle how we go from point A in a crisis (starting point, our present) to point B (the diegetic starting point) to eventually point C (the resolution) and become a didactic tool for both suggestions of material resolutions—you, reader in the diegetic past/real present, do this if you wish to overcome—but also emotional comfort—your crisis may seem unending, but this too shall pass.

Dystopian projection into the future, as Carter Hanson notes, prods the reader to question their present and to imagine ways into which we can end up there or how we can avoid it (2020: 152). Opening up the possibility of change draws a path toward an end, toward closure, and as Frederic (2005) indicates in *Archaeologies of the Future*, this trait turns out to be an antidote against apathy and conformism. In a psychological study conducted by Maja Djikic et al. (2013), reading literary fiction was conclusively linked to an increase in an individual's capacity for overcoming cognitive closure, which hinders decision-making and encumbers critical thinking. As I explore in the following analysis, contemporary dystopias contribute to the growing conception of crises as interconnected, systemic challenges that are better tackled as a group instead of as heroic individuals. The particular relationship of dystopias with memory and closure contributes at the same time to an increased awareness of crises and promotes a call for action by narrating pathways toward closure.

Remembering worse futures

Early future dystopias

The first body of works I set out to analyze presents an early aftermath of current crises as the dystopian setting. Despite the timespan between a dystopic scenario and a previously stable time being relatively short, memory and its associated devices of amnesia and nostalgia have a distinctive role in chronicling change, particularly sudden traumatic alterations.

Published originally in 2013 as *Al-Tabuur*, *The Queue* can be described as a satirical dystopia set in an indefinite Middle Eastern country during the early 2010s. The plot revolves around a series of characters that must face the unwavering bureaucratic terror of the Gate, a group that has gained control of the state and which forces the population to comply with an ever-growing series of paperwork requests that are, at the same time, impossible to complete given that public offices are systematically closed or excruciatingly slow in filing applications, creating a queue that grows exponentially longer each day. The novel draws direct inspiration from classical dystopias like Orwell's *1984* or Sonallah Ibrahim's *Al Lajna* (*The Committee*), but also Franz Kafka's depiction of bureaucracy's terrifying capacities for oppression via exhaustion and absurdism. Based on the setting, the timing of publication, and the author's own words (Underwood, 2016), *The Queue* is a direct reference to the aftermath of the so-called Arab Spring revolution, particularly the rise of the Muslim Brothers to power in Egypt during the summer of 2012. The novel contains many coded references to the author's present (the conflation of religious and civil power or even the irruption of long, futile queues) out of caution for censorship or retaliation, but the conflicts are not strictly local and they resonate with many transnational themes belonging to a sense of contemporary

political crisis and degradation of democratic societies (fake news, police brutality, a decay of privacy through technological vigilance, or extreme ideological polarization).

Yehya, who suffers a bullet injury during a riot against the new status quo, is rejected time and again by different hospitals for not providing authorization to receive a bullet extraction. As the novel unfolds, the Gate deploys its propaganda apparatuses to alter the memory of the riots, now called "the Disgraceful Events," first to indicate that there was no shooting—and therefore, no bullets could ever be found in bodies—and later to imply that the event did not occur—and therefore, there could not be any injured. The novel stresses the relevance of control over narratives and public memory through the description of the Gate's attempt of reining in and then transforming an episode of opposition to cement their legitimacy. It shows how power intercedes in both the individual and the group's processes of memory formation via a mix of coercion and persuasion. When approaching the masses, the Gate strong-arms the population by forcing them to myriad paperwork requirements but simultaneously prevents their realization until they all have agreed on their version of history (Abdel and Aziz, 2016 (2013): 72).

As for the individual characters in the novel, their specific circumstances are dismissed. Amani's attempt to seek justice ends up with her being tortured and locked down in a dark room until she thinks of herself as nothingness, broken down, the paradoxical existence of amnesia (Abdel and Aziz, 2016 (2013): 115). A wicked type of closure can only be possible upon compliance with hegemonic interpretations of reality that either deny crises or exonerate the power group from their responsibility in the matter. Despite the efforts made by his reluctant doctor, Tarek, and his brave girlfriend, Amani, the end of the book suggests that Yehya dies of his wounds.

Ma Jian wrote *Zhongguo Meng* in 2018, and translated it into English as *China Dream*. As one of the most prominent and wildly read novelist's critic of the Chinese Communist Party abroad, the novel follows the lines of his other previous works like *Rou zhi tu* [*Beijing Comma*] (2008) and *Yun chi dao* [*The Dark Road*] (2012) in being openly bashful of contemporary China. His novels depict unapologetically coarse—and sometimes morbid—imagery to reinforce the crudeness of his criticism. *China Dream* tells the story of Ma Daode, a Communist Party leader in Sichuan and regional director of the newly minted China Dream Bureau, as his boastful confidence and grip of reality rapidly disintegrate because he is haunted by traumatic memories of the Cultural Revolution. The novel pulls the reader into Ma's growing inability to distinguish present from the fantasies of his recollections he tries to get released from until meeting an inevitable dramatic demise.

The title is a direct reference to Chinese president Xi Jinping's homonymous national campaign of "revitalization" (*fuxing*) to restore national pride and glory through the reinforcement of so-called communist values. Part of this effort entails the restoration of national pride and the reinterpretation of post-1949 events (the Great Leap Forward or the Cultural Revolution) under a more positive light through a propaganda campaign that asks citizens to engage with its goals more openly (Callahan, 2015; Hizi, 2019). Within this paradigm, the management of history and cultural memory becomes an essential tool to meet Xi and the CCP's domestic aims, a circumstance that becomes the central focus of Ma's novel. The fictional China Dream Bureau is created to make sure that all citizens agree and comply with the government's idea of what a China dream could mean. To unify this idea and avoid discrepancies, Ma Daode acknowledges, individual memories must be doctored for they interfere in the construction of a shared future: "It seems clear to me that if the communal China Dream is to fully impregnate the mind, all private remembrances and dreams must first be washed away" (Ma, 2018a: 10). He even suggests microchipping every resident and start monitoring not only their conscious thoughts but also during their sleep. It is at this point that the novel embraces its dystopian nature, although, same as *The Queue*, it tries to remain eerily close to the present by designing its criticisms merely as extensions of existing current policies.

Despite Ma Daode's public eagerness to carry on the duties of his bureau, he is assaulted from the moment he takes up the job precisely by memories of his actions during the Cultural Revolution as a young man conscripted for reeducation to a nearby village. These are memories of political violence and in-group atrocities that are in open contradiction with the message of unity and revisionism that the China Dream campaign tries to promote. These memories enter during his sleep but in time they slip into his conscious state to the point that neither he nor the reader can clearly differentiate between what's part of his past and what's in his present day. The novel shows how "his memories are like footballs on a pond: the harder he pushes them down, the higher they bounce up again" (Ma, 2018a: 50). The reenactment of memories as if they were happening in real-time is a device for the representation of traumatic memories in literature. Traumas break the progressive nature of memory formation; there is no "before" or "after" within a traumatic memory, and the person who has to process its effects is entrapped at the moment of the event (Van Alphen, 2005: 161). Ma Daode's incapacity to rewire these individual memories to comply with the institutional interpretation because of their traumatic nature can be read as Ma Jian's strongest criticism of the whole campaign. It is naïve and even dangerous to expect that forced amnesia or historical revisionism can be useful tools in a project of legitimation, especially when there is a generation that still remembers these events. Ma Daode's quest to get rid of his memories leads him to ingest a risky concoction that ensures permanent amnesia. While it works for his desired purposes, it renders him so infatuated by the China Dream's slogans that he jumps off a window completely sure that a future so bright could never do him harm.

Set vaguely in 2012 but published in 2018, *Severance: A Novel*, by Ling Ma, explores in two parallel timelines the life of Candace Chen just before and immediately after a cataclysmic epidemic outbreak. The novel shifts back and forth between the two moments to portray two stories that move chronologically. A pandemic called the "Shenzhen Flu" (its parallels to COVID-19 were a reason for the novel's popularity in the spring of 2020 (Hu, 2020; Kelly, 2020)), produced by fungal spores, expands across the globe. *Severance*'s criticism of the contemporary capitalist condition combines open denunciation with more subtle creative means. The illness forces infected individuals to repeat a specific set of actions over and over again until they die of exhaustion. These repetition entrapments (called "loops" in the novel) catch many individuals doing what was their regular job. Instead of moving out of New York as society gradually decays, Candace, who appears immune to the infection, accepts her company's proposition of staying in the empty offices on the off chance that business could come back, unnecessarily mirroring the senseless cycle of labor repetition, erasing the differences between the infected and herself and reinforcing the responsibility of capitalism in the pandemic's expansion through international trade routes.

The book is also an honest and complex exploration of migrant and minority identities within global capitalism. Candace works for a publishing firm that before the epidemic managed the manufacture of novelty books, like custom bibles, in China. Candace's job as an intermediary in what she knows is a scheme of labor exploitation in China pushes her to reevaluate her position as an Asian American. The interlinkage between identity and a critique of global capitalism happens also in the dimension of memory. Her position takes Candace to explore her relationship with China as a place of problematic nostalgia (Gullander-Drolet, 2021; Saraf, 2019). Although it is never confirmed, the novel also suggests that there is a strong link between nostalgia and infections. The novel's second timeline is set a few weeks after Candace has left New York. It tells how she joins a group of survivors who gradually embrace cultist rhetoric and behavior. The survivors share to some degree a sense of displacement from their backgrounds. However, when faced with a situation that triggers some sort of longing for the past (like one of the members raiding her old home or the survivor's leader settling the group in his childhood shopping mall), their latent infections get activated and they turn fevered. Candace's particular identity dislocation apparently

protects her from the sickness, but the price to pay for this is a distance from her memories and affective ties. Once they learn Candace is pregnant, the survivors imprison her in a shopping mall that is their newfound headquarters. She breaks out of there and the novel ends with Candace facing an uncertain but relatively freer future on her own.

Candace becomes therefore representative of a new model of intersectional identity that speaks of multiple crises: young, politically critical but not an activist, an independent female character, an uprooted migrant that is not traumatized by nostalgia but adapted—albeit not painlessly—to fluidity. Candace is defined by the combination of all of these circumstances; the novel does not hierarchize the fact that she is a woman, or an Asian American, or a precariat professional as isolated conflicts. Instead, this protagonist reinforces the message that crises need to be understood as systemic entanglements that must be approached and interpreted together in order to see the whole picture. *Severance* emerges then as a notable example of this evolution of critical dystopias toward integrating an intersectional approach to crises.

Works like *The Queue* and *China Dream* show that memory in near-future dystopias turns into a weapon for the legitimation of an oppressive system and, simultaneously, for articulating dissent against it. The management and resistance to selective amnesia is coupled by the representation of shock and opportunity in coming to terms with sudden changes in the cultural memory's narration of a group and the individual, a conflict explored in the challenges faced by the characters of *Severance* and which stretches toward the next subcorpus of novels.

Dystopias of a middle-term future

Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* is also a dystopian novel about the aftermath of an epidemic that is built around two different timelines, one prior to the apocalyptic event and another accounting for its consequences. The difference is that the scenario of the future is this time set 20 years after the outbreak. *Station Eleven* is then part of a body of dystopian fiction that explores the conflict between a clash of generations: those who lived and remember a previous, non-dystopian world and those whose consciousness was shaped mainly or exclusively within the new paradigm. Memory—both individual and cultural—holds therefore an important role in the narration of time and the construction of a sense of closure for the reader: what is remembered and interpreted of the previous order can be either a cause of pain and instability or a source of inspiration for change, either because it becomes a cautionary tale or because defending memory against amnesia represents resistance against manipulation or oppression.

In *Station Eleven*'s plot, a deadly illness (this time the "Georgia Flu") swiftly kills the vast majority of the people in the world. The main story arc happens two decades after the outbreak and it involves a traveling troupe of actors and musicians that journey across the United States performing Shakespeare plays for the surviving communities. The novel reinforces a difference between those who remember a previous time and those who don't, either because their memories are erased or because they were born in the new world. *Station Eleven*'s main conflict is less that of survival and more that of memory's main role in the new world. Most characters struggle to preserve the past in some shape or form. Kirsten Raymonde, a member of the troupe, acts as a bridge between timelines. She was a kid when the pandemic had struck and had a small role in a theater piece with a Hollywood star, Arthur Leander. Kirsten is obsessed with a comic book called *Station Eleven*, gifted by Leander right before the outbreak and written by his ex-wife Elizabeth, whose dystopian sci-fi story revolves around a group of survivors that must flee the world and take refuge in a space station. Kirsten's childhood memories are fragmentary and very scarce: she cannot remember anything from the years immediately after the outbreak, most probably due to trauma, but she clings to her last recollection right before the outbreak: receiving that comic book from

Leander, which is, in turn, a dystopian fiction. The novel plays with the relationship between culture, memory, and loss. The company plays Shakespeare, whose works were also written in the context of a pandemic. Clark, Leander's best friend and a survivor of the whole ordeal, has erected and supports a museum of the pre-apocalyptic world. The success of his museum is the most obvious example of Mandel's idea of a dystopian society's relevance for institutionalizing memories through cultural artifacts.

Nostalgia takes up an enormous role in the novel, but the debate over its effects is not fairly explored. After a tense encounter in a village that is controlled by a death cult, the company flees to a supposedly safe settlement while being chased and hunted down by the leader of the sect. The death cult's leader is introduced as the extreme example of someone consumed by nostalgia and memories of a previous life. This circumstance has led him to build a teleological worldview that shapes a narrative of the epidemic as willed by destiny. For the rest of the characters, the epidemic broke the flow of time, reset history, and fragmented the way people experience events. Individual memories became either a place of pain or one of inaccessibility. For the cult leader, however, time kept moving forward toward an objective always ahead. Besieged by the need for meaning and closure, the leader is trapped in a dynamic where an end always in sight but never reached justifies his violent means. However, given that we don't get full access to the cult leader's thoughts or motivations, his sudden death leaves this path uncultivated and superficially criticized.

The novel's tepidity to venture into open criticism of contemporary crises has already been pointed out by other authors. Compared with Ling Ma, Mandel's take on a global epidemic doesn't account for the role of capitalism in its conception or spread (Méndez-García, 2017: 125) and even can be seen legitimating the current status quo through nostalgia as a place desired to go back to (De Cristofaro, 2018: 17; West, 2018: 2). This romantization of a previous time (our present) is partially driven by an epistemic framework that prioritizes a hegemonic Eurocentric worldview (Leggatt, 2018: 18; Smith, 2016: 298). It is unfair, however, to suggest that *Station Eleven* is reactionary or completely uncritical. Its design as a choral novel and the reliance on action and responsibility as a community instead of the extraordinary acts of single heroic individuals is in line with the current evolution of dystopian fiction to incorporate an approach to solutions as shared endeavors instead of as messianic deeds.

Tawada Yōko's 2015 novel *Kentōshi* (published in the United States as *The Emissary* and in the United Kingdom as *The Last Children of Tokyo*) was written as a continuation of her previous short story *Fushi no shima*, or "The Island of Eternal Life." It describes a Japan that, after suffering natural and nuclear disasters that are directly inspired by the triple incident of 11 March 2011, closes down to the world. The main story revolves around two characters, Yoshiro and his great-grandson Mumei. The novel shows how the government's control over the narrative is enforced through silences and selective amnesia. The democratic government is supplanted by a conglomerate of corporations, free speech and movement are limited, but the state enforces its legitimacy through the control of narratives instead of relying on coercion. The closing of Japan's borders is intended also to avoid a plurality of narratives entering in conflict with the hegemonic discourse. The government's framing of the disasters as unavoidable catastrophes releases the authorities from any responsibility for their happening or ensuring their prevention. This attempt at shaping the narrative of the disaster mirrors the real-life Japanese government's stance toward the memory of the 3.11 disasters.

The management of individual as well as public memories is one of the main conflicts of this work too. Mutations from the nuclear accident have meant that older generations, those that survived the disaster, have extremely long lifespans and they retain and even improve their strength with time. Yoshiro, as the representative of his generation, is doomed to remember not only the world previous to the disaster but also an always expanding life. Although he is the subject that

experienced the traumatic event, the effects are only suffered by generations that have not lived directly the event, and therefore hold no memories of it, only its consequences. Younger generations are sickly, entirely dependent on the elderly, and can experience strange transfigurations: changing their genitals overnight or morphing their limbs as the extremities of other animals, like fishes, octopi, or birds. They don't know a previous world and are not haunted by a nostalgia that knows no end for natural death is apparently outside Yoshiro's grasp. The younger generations get only a very partial version of the disaster that is the source of their bane.

The Emissary engages the same way with other multiple contemporary crises, but does so indirectly, using the dystopian setting and the slightly fantastic device of mutations to do so. A country peopled by elders refers to Japan's long-running decrease in birth rate and already long lifespan; a crippled younger generation has its parallels in today's precarious workforce; the government's replacement by businesses is a stab at Japan's close ties between the political class and the oligarchy; and the closing down of the borders criticizes regrettable xenophobic attitudes and policies. The novel can be approached therefore as an exercise of perverse closure, a dystopian scenario that takes present-day social anxieties and elevates them to a point of fantastic exaggeration while remaining reasonably plausible to generate empathy. It shares with previous critical dystopias a bestowing of agency to characters that wish to change an unfair status quo. Simultaneously, it shares with other contemporary dystopian fiction the conception of crises as systemic and interrelated and the emphasis on community action instead of heroic intervention. Mumei is being groomed by a secret society to be sent abroad, fooling the blockade, to be studied by foreign experts. According to Dan Fujiwara (2020), the story's spherical description of time invites hope, for it breaks temporal linearity and curves the future. *The Emissary*'s vague ending, with Mumei ready to be dispatched abroad but right before that losing consciousness, sends, however, a bittersweet message of mixed hope for the success of the organization, but at the cost of the individual.

We see how the main conflict in these novels in terms of the role of memory in the articulation of crises is the clash between generations in how memory is approached, addressed, and incorporated as an element that can give meaning to a troubled world. Memory becomes a dividing element between those who lived a previous time and those born and/or shaped in a different, post-crisis (or within crisis) paradigm. Nostalgia appears here as an ambivalent tool, a generator of cautionary tales for some, a dangerous appeal for the reactionary to others, or a source for inspiration to those that want to build from the ashes.

Dystopias of a long-term future

The final two works that I want to explore project memories that stretch several generations. As individuals who lived in a pre-dystopian world are dead or have issues remembering due to old age, cultural memory, either as unofficial chronicling or institutional historicization takes up an even more important role. Tensions between individual and collective memories become less present and conflict resides in the uncertainty of whether what is being chronicled is legitimate and reliable.

Mexican writer Andrea Chapela's *Ansibles, Profilers, and Other Machines of Wonder* is a collection of short stories that imagine the potential outcomes of technological advances—virtual reality, social media, cyborg implants—for our personal and social lives. Although it would be a stretch to consider these stories as promoting a technophobic stance, Chapela's grim futures share many traits with the cyberpunk and techno-dystopia genres. For my analysis, I focus on two of these tales: *Ahora lo sientes* ["Now you feel it"] and *Como quien oye llover* ["Like water off a duck's back"]. The first story deals explicitly with the possibilities for memory manipulation using technological means. It imagines a future in which it is possible to hire the services of professionals

that can hack into your mind and alter your recollections. Although it is not possible to change past actions, the story suggests that changing our memory of previous events can be just as useful. It can ease our sense of guilt and responsibility for damaging incidents and avoid the crippling effects of trauma. As the story reckons, meddling with memories leads to the dehumanization of tampered subjects. Artificially free from the burdens of past mistakes but also the lessons embedded from these errors, they simply cannot calibrate their ethical positions and act unmindful of consequences for themselves and their communities.

Como quien oye llover is set decades from our present in what used to be Mexico City. The capital is in this scenario a drowned metropolis after a meteorological event that lasted for years. The site of Mexico City returned to its original condition: a lake in a valley. Settlers have founded floating villages on its shores. The story is centered on the dangerous journey of romantic courting that two girls make to the center of the lake. On the way there, braving the inclemency of rogue weather, they exchange accounts of how the city used to be and how it came underwater. The story uses their conversations as a device for narrating the changes and for establishing a traditional chronology that invites the reader to imagine a potential unfolding of events from our present. History and folktales are blurred together in a relationship that predates the modern constitution of cultural institutes that manage public memory. None of the characters in the story lived the pre-apocalyptic time, so their knowledge of the past is made out of hearsay and family tales of what life used to be in the city before its drowning. The two girls understand history as narration and in their travel to the heart of the sunken metropolis, they exchange bits of presumed knowledge that came from gossip passed on through generations as legitimate wisdom. *Como quien oye llover* also stands out as the only story in the collection that is not a cyber-dystopia, fitting more properly as a piece of cli-fi.

Chapela's stories are clear denunciations of what she perceives are some of the most pressing challenges of her present, placed in a grim future that exposes its consequences as it is innate of the dystopian genre. Although each story puts particular emphasis on a topic to criticize (like the ethical dangers of mixing technological editing and memory or the effects of man-made climate change), her approach to contemporary crises is also understood as a network of interrelated challenges. The growing gap of economic inequalities, the degradation of democracy, or the adapted subsistence of patriarchal violences are the backdrop for the development of plots that most of the time deal in the particular with the insulating and denaturalizing effect of unchecked technological progress. The episodic nature of short stories, especially when they are anthologized following the same leitmotivs, allows the reader to quickly enter and exit from potential "what if" scenarios. Despite the short time a reader stays in each of these rooms, every tale is an effort of world-building that can cover more ground in exploring the many different anxieties of closure provoked by the fast pace of technological advance brought by the Internet era.

Kim Stanley Robinson, 2020 novel *The Ministry for the Future* follows his previously well-established career as a writer of cli-fi by exploring in great detail the many ways in which climate change could destabilize our current geopolitical order, but also the many ways in which we could tackle it. The main plot spans four decades, following the creation by the United Nations of a special bureau called the Ministry for the Future that is in charge of making sure the goals of the Paris Agreement are duly met. The two main characters are the Ministry's first director and a survivor of an apocalyptic heatwave in India that kills millions of people in just a few days. They share a turbulent relationship that provides an emotional subplot that counteracts the novel's main reliance on heavy discussions of policy, economics, and science. The book is divided into over 100 chapters that play with different narrative styles: scripted dialogues, omniscient narration, riddles, and essayistic lectures on the multiple topics the novel throws at the reader.

The Ministry for the Future has a problematic fit as a dystopian novel. Its ultimate message is unambiguous of hope and it relies on based descriptions of actual projects instead of purely

fictional schemes, although most of them are as of today still theoretical and the reluctance of world powers to implement them may reinforce in time the book's fictional dimension. I argue that it can still be approached and analyzed in conjunction with other more openly dystopian narratives, for it shares with them the imagining of a worse future as a consequence of inaction or failure to remedy in time current predicaments. In this regard, *The Ministry for the Future* is explicitly vocal in its criticism of ongoing crises and falls in line with the rest of the analyzed works in addressing them as bundled together in a network of intersectional dependencies that we must tackle as a community (Brady, 2020).

The narration of time is a particularly significant device in this novel. As the main plot unfolds chronologically into the future, the narrator describes the development of major events adopting the confidence of historical accounting. Individual memories and personal interpretations are disregarded for the sake of an institutionalized, unquestioned description of history. Robinson doesn't delve into the inevitable clash of conflicting accounts of events, delivering instead a rugged but mainly streamlined record of history being developed in front of the reader's eyes. He even adds in the occasional perspective of voices from the future that are telling these events as part of a distant past, having acquired historiographical conventions like the naming of decades, paradigmatic episodes, or eras that can only be established with the necessary hindsight. This way of narrating time is particularly rewarding for the construction of closure. Not only the novel does offer and explore practical solutions to what today is the cumbersome task of tackling the climate crises, but it provides a clear historical line that, albeit imaginary, the reader can follow, acknowledge its fearful consequences, but also gratify when action is taken and solutions are reached, a dynamic far from our present-day situation. *The Ministry for the Future* manages to turn our most life-threatening crisis and a natural source for dystopian anxiety into a source for hope and inspiration for decision-making, features associated with a pursuit of closure.

These novels have followed the evolution on the handling of memory in dystopias that, in turn, has been present in the previous subcorpora. They explore the clash between memory and history, that is, the friction that occurs once memory as an element linked to the lived experienced of an individual and a community fades, becomes distorted, or mutates into the narration of history. Instead of amnesia or nostalgia, we have, on one hand, the forgetting of events, and on the other, the management of pre-crises events in a way that has the potential for being manipulative at the hands of interested parties or an opportunity for transformative change through closure, exploiting dystopia's capacity to turn hopeful.

Closure as conclusion

The objective of this piece has been to study how contemporary dystopian fiction relates to ongoing crises through the articulation of individual and collective memory and the narration of time. I have argued that, first, dystopian literature of the past 10 years has approached current challenges as a systemic network of interrelated predicaments. Second, continuing with the tradition of critical dystopias, it conveys agency to the characters in their capacity to produce change in their dystopian contexts, but instead of turning to heroic individuals or Hobbesian man-against-the-world tropes, these works entrust the group and community action as the more effectual way to transform society. Third, I have explored the ways in which the dystopian genre's capacities for promoting change from social criticism are closely related to the diegetic narration of time and the role of memory for the individuals and groups represented in these stories. Finally, I have examined the association between dystopias' capacity for imagining the future and the potential for effecting change through the idea of closure.

The analysis of these works reveals a possible correlation between a fictional narrative's way of chronicling time and handling memories as linked with the expansion or narrowing down of agency for the diegetic characters. Closure is associated not only with a sense of ending, but also with knowing the road ahead of it. A more open and clear representation of chronicled time, even if it is imaginary historiography of what could happen, provides more chances for the identification of conflicts, the development of their complex and conflicting causes and consequences, and the projection of solutions. Assessing the management of memories becomes illustrative of a work's relationship with time, which in turn indicates the level of agency enabled to the characters, the margin to explore solutions, and the capacity for closure. The study of this body of dystopian fiction has shown that the arrestment and restriction of individual and collective memories, either by oppressive regimes or recent traumatic events, limits agency and curtails solutions. This repressive administration of memories is more common in near future dystopias and closure is more difficult or impossible for these cases, as in *The Queue* or *China Dream*. The more dystopia adheres to chronicle time, the more room for exploration of how conflicts can be tackled, even if solutions are not readily available. Dystopias of a middle-term future like *Station Eleven* or *The Emissary* reveal in turn the significance of the process and the tensions generated by this conflict.

The complex treatment of memories and a chronicling of time that could incite productive closure are associated also with the plural understanding of contemporary crises. Conflicts are not single adversities whose roots, weak points, and remedies can be clearly identified, but rhizomatic networks of intersectional struggles that have systemic bases and repercussions. They complement each other, so to properly assess them, crises need to be understood as a part of the same landscape of conflicts and challenges. Classic dystopias proposed an understanding of crises as the main crux even if it appears represented as different points of repression. Contemporary criticism is accepting that systemic oppressions act in different dimensions that are not always visible, as Rob Nixon (2011) explores through his concept of "slow violence." A potential map of solutions must integrate this reality and address its strategy from an intersectional paradigm of decision-making.

Finally, I want to point out how this seeming strand of contemporary dystopia that is more aware of the interconnectedness of crises and which allots agency to the community rather than the heroic individual gears fiction that was in its inception essentially pessimistic toward unexpected hope. Among the discussed works, those that are more choral, rely on group dynamics, and approach solutions as mid- to long-term goals instead of individual savior tropes, like *Station Eleven*, *The Emissary*, or *The Ministry for the Future* project a more feasible and positive way out. Hopeful dystopias are cautionary tales with a potential roadmap to prevention, reaction, and the imagination of alternatives. I have explored how part of the capacity of a dystopia to breed hope relies on the way it handles time, memory, and, in doing so, facilitates the possibilities for closure. For in order to devise an end to a problem, one must first imagine the journey toward reaching it.

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