

Transcription

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Episode 8: Hope and Art when the World is Falling Apart.

<https://soundcloud.com/user-760891605/episode-7-hope-and-art-when-the-world-is-falling-apart>

Teaser: “So, when the world around you is falling apart, like the rest of the world today, how do you make sense of it? And, art is such a useful tool for that.”

Host intro: In the era of climate change, how can we imagine better futures? [An Ecotopian Lexicon](#) is a collaborative volume of short, engaging essays that offer ecologically productive terms — drawn from other languages, science fiction and subcultures of resistance — to envision what could be. The book connects 30 authors and 14 artists from a range of backgrounds and locations, and three of them are here in discussion today. This conversation was recorded in August 2020.

Michelle Kuen Suet Fung: Hello, everyone. My name is [Michelle Kuen Suet Fung](#). I am located in Hong Kong, and I am a practicing visual artist. The title of my piece is *Nahual*.

Sam Solnick: Hi, everyone. My name is [Sam Solnick](#). I'm currently in Liverpool in the U.K., where I teach at the local university, and I wrote the *Apocalypso* entry.

Charis Boke: Hi, I'm [Charis Boke](#) and I'm located in Vermont, in the Northeast of the United States, and I am currently teaching at [Saint Michael's College](#) and affiliated with [The College of Physicians of Philadelphia](#). My entry is titled *Plant Time*.

MKSF: Let me start by saying why I got involved in this project. It actually started in Alaska, out of all places. I was in Alaska for an artist residency. Under the theme climate change, we visited eight communities there. And on that same residency was another playwright, [Chantal Bilodeau](#), and she introduced me to this project. And that's how I got involved because all my works revolve around building a futuristic world, in [the] year 2084. And that presents the geopolitical maps in the age of [the] [Anthropocene](#). So, the mandate of this book just

completely echoes my own practice, and there was no point in me saying no, and that's how I became involved in this project.

SS: So, I guess one of the things that piqued my curiosity about this book was that I'm generally a fan of books or collections that bring together short essays on individual words and concepts. I think part of that is the influence of a book called [Keywords by Raymond Williams](#) when I was an undergrad, which is a little bit dated now and probably more popular on this side of the Atlantic, in the U.K., than in the U.S.A. It was great because there were these one-page essays on a single concept that helped you think through things. So, that appealed, but in general, I just thought the collection sounded really cool, and that its interdisciplinary nature would mean that people beyond my specialism would read it, which isn't something that you can say about most stuff you write as an academic. That's the great tragedy — [you] spend your time slaving away, writing these journal articles that no one ever reads. And I found the idea of an “ecotopian lexicon” really fascinating because it brings together this idea of a utopian — which we know means a good place and a “no” place — with the word “eco” — this word that gives us the sense of dwelling place or the collection of different organisms in the environments. As I was right here, I kept on having that idea in mind that we were writing this kind of guidebook, or map, or spell book for imagining and articulating a kind of ecological future that doesn't exist yet, but that we might want. To me, that just seemed a really fascinating idea.

CB: I got involved in this project sort of in a similar way to both Michelle and Sam, which is that I saw the call for contributions, and it lined up so perfectly with things I was thinking about and working on at the time that I couldn't say no. And part of that was noticing the ways that my — so, I'm an anthropologist, and I work with white herbalists in the Northeast of the US, and a lot of the folks that I work with are deeply invested in changing the world and in changing what health care looks like and in changing what relationships look like. I'm personally invested in those things, too. And so, the opportunity to work on a project where we take language and shift it around, or draw on conceptual frameworks outside of what's already available to us in English was really exciting for me. To think, what are some ways that we can learn — that English speakers can learn — from other lexicons, other linguistic frameworks to reform our relationship to other humans, other than humans [or nonhumans] to [the] planet itself, [but also] to our lives, even to our own bodies. This rethinking and reimagining is something that has compelled my various practices throughout life. And so, in a way, my

Plant Time entry is not only linked to the anthropological work of my life but also to the activist work that I do as an herbalist and as a medic. And also as a teacher, saying, how do we as scholars, as artists, as teachers, as older adults make space for folks that are coming up in this world, and are younger, to figure out how to live well on a planet that is full of suffering? It's always been full of suffering in some ways, but now finds itself in a particular kind of moment with climate change. So, the whole project to me is an exciting rethinking of what it means to reimagine the world in a better way.

MKSF: Well, I have to confess, I received this book in the mail maybe after Christmas, and I hope I'm not the only one in the universe who does this because I flipped through the book, I thought it looked great. And then, it stayed on my bookshelf for months, untouched. A few weeks ago, partly to prepare for this podcast and partly for self-interest, I started really reading the book, and I thought it was really good. When I read it, I found it a refreshing, New Agey anthology, but backed by thoughtful scholarship in the 21st century. It's very timely. It addresses the much-needed global perspective on a global issue — climate change — while still being sensitive with sensitive areas such as cultural appropriation. And what I really loved about this book is each piece is short and sweet. My husband is a recovering academic, so I'm very familiar with academic writing. So, what I loved about this book is that the reader is not overwhelmed with an onslaught of dry, academic language. I didn't feel tired and [didn't need] a nap after reading each piece. Instead, I felt excited and rejuvenated to read another piece, or look up the new terms in each essay. I found this book is not one where you read from start to finish, but rather, you should dip into it when the mood is right; ponder and come back for another long word when the mood is right again.

SS: I just want to second Michelle, that I'm a terrible one for getting books, flicking them through — ignoring the — flicking to the back, wondering what I should read, reading half of page 99. And then, actually, it was a real pleasure to just kind of settle down with this and take some alternate paths through it. That's the lovely thing about this, that the nature of the entries means that you can read it from A to Z, or you can follow your lines of desire or interest, or indeed, randomness through the different concepts. But I like that all these concepts and “loanwords” — it's not a list saying, “These are the words through which you need to understand the Anthropocene” (or whichever word we want to give our current socio-ecological political moment). But rather, by being a kind of diverse,

interdisciplinary book that brings together everything from science fiction to different languages to dolphin breath, or dolphin speech in its first entry, it offers us this series of imaginative words and alternate concepts for opening up our thinking and our imaginative processes. And in doing so, [it] opens up different sorts of possibility, and this comes back to this idea of a language for the ecotopian, a language for a future that doesn't exist yet, that might never exist but that we can work towards if we hope for it, if we desire it, if we want it. [The book's editors] Brent [Ryan Bellamy] and Matthew [Schneider-Mayerson] in their introduction talk about it as opening up these different other worlds that might be possible, even if they're only imaginary, these possible alternative futures that we can see but only in a kind of refracted, funhouse mirror or through a glass darkly, and that's why I think it's not just a fascinating book but also a fun one.

CB: Yeah, I agree. It's sort of a relief to hear that both of you, my co-authors, co-contributors to this volume also received your copies and then took a nice, long break before really diving in. It is so beautifully put together. And I'm glad that you brought up the paths, Sam, because I think that the paths is one of the things that makes this unique. The book is organized in a standard lexical way, alphabetically, using the English-language alphabet, of course, because the book is in English, except where it is in "dolphic" or other languages, and then we have the opportunity to hear, or to read what the symbols of dolphin language sound like or feel like. So, it's organized alphabetically. And it's also organized in these paths which I believe the editors put together, and the paths track, link across loanwords. So, the paths have tracks like "resistance," like "dispositions," like "perception." So, there are five entries under dispositions, for instance, which is where your piece is, Sam — and four entries under perception. And I think that these alternate paths that help you track through the book to organize concepts is a really useful way to move through the text and the images that are here because they are so diverse, the words themselves, the concepts themselves are so diverse; they're not all about the quote-unquote ecological. They're not all about the quote-unquote natural. They're so wide-ranging in the ways, and they come from speculative fiction, they come from spiritual and religious traditions of the actually existing world. They come from animal worlds, they come from just all over the place. So, the way that that other path organizes things I think is a really unique organizational scheme. I also just wanted to highlight that point about imagination, which I think is a key element, and I referenced this a little bit earlier. The key element about what this text and the images in it, or the art that

was created in conversation with the texts offers is a rethinking of what is possible, and the editors say this in their introduction, they bring up this idea. I'll just read this short passage that says: "fascists and totalitarians understood that by restricting the imagination and consideration of alternative possibilities—of politics, policy, and social life—citizens would resign themselves to the order of things, thereby enabling further manipulation by political and financial elites." Certainly, in a long context of climate change we've seen a lot of this, but I think in this particular moment — I'm located in the United States and this particular moment — the importance of rethinking what is possible is very much on my mind, and on the minds of a lot of people in the context of uprisings against police brutality, and the criminal mismanagement of coronavirus. So, the last thing I'll say about this is that Brent and Matthew, the editors, also referenced this rallying cry — "Another world is possible" — that is used in activist movements to remind us that we can rethink how things are done, and how we are on the planet. And I wanted to just highlight the first part of that chant as it has been chanted at protests I've been at, which is, "We are unstoppable." And that implies, that beginning phrase, "We are unstoppable," followed by, "Another world as possible," implies an against whom: "We are unstoppable against whom — ." So, I think part of what this book opens up is a conversation about how do we be in a relationship with the adversaries of thriving, the adversaries of life that enables us to move beyond the death dealing of white supremacist, colonial capitalism, essentially. No big deal. So, I do see a lot of hope, and I think hope was the theme we were invited to reflect on today and I see a lot of hope coming out of these entries and the art that accompanies it.

MKSF: I'm going to talk about Sam's piece, *Apocalypso*. I'm going to begin with reading my favorite sentence, and then, my second-favorite sentence from his piece: "apocalypsos are text or visions that absorb but also disrupt apocalyptic futures." And here comes my second-favorite sentence: "Apocalypso fuses the alarm and concern surrounding discussions of environmental crisis with the sense of play, togetherness, and critique typical of the calypso tradition." So, after reading Sam's piece, to me, his piece is about the creative works that describe, deconstruct and usurp the idea of an apocalypse. And he quoted examples such as [Evelyn Reilly's](#) poetry collection. What really, really drew me to Sam's piece is he mixes the sense of doom with a sense of play. And I think humor, and this sense of wonder is so critical and essential in persisting in difficult situations. It's this childlike wonder, or this optimistic, positive twist of the situation, with which is humor that really pulls us through any adversity. Art, whether it is literary,

whether it's visual, whether it's music, whether it's food, is such a useful tool because it is essentially a concentration of human experiences, and that includes humor and sense of wonder. So, art is such a useful tool to pull yourself through an adversity. It's [a] concentration of one's emotional and intellectual reactions to the world. So, when the world around you is falling apart, like the rest of the world today, how do you make sense of it? And, art is such a useful tool for that. And those who are blessed with the gift to manifest these reactions in an aesthetic form, the makers are transformed in that process. I, myself, have made artworks during very painful situations, and that was very therapeutic for me. But also, those who partake as participants, like an audience, a reader, a viewer, they also engage in this intensely emotional or intellectual exercise. So, I was very drawn to this notion of play and especially, this echoes my current research. I mentioned previously that my work revolves around building this narrative of a dystopian world in [the] year 2084. There are five imaginary countries in this world — [Northlandia, Dreamland, Contradictoria, the Aristocratic Union, and the Republic of Strata](#). And currently, I am researching for Northlandia, which is a narrative that takes place in the Arctic, and we all know that [this summer, the Arctic hit 38 degrees Celsius](#), which is a hundred degrees Fahrenheit, which is warmer than Hong Kong, the subtropic. And I don't know how to continue with this narrative if I don't have this sense of play, or have some sense of hope. How do we continue? I think this playfulness is so important. Inside this narrative, there are fun things like a mountain-size ice cream maker. There is a military troop that's made of fat, jumping seals, and there are giant puffins. And I think only with these playful, humorous gems [can] people can really respond to a difficult situation, and really think and nurture hope. Otherwise, it is too difficult. So, having shared a little bit of my own works with you, I'm really curious for Charis and Sam, how do you envision our world in a hundred years. What would be strikingly similar, and what would be permanently different?

SS: The question is a tricky one — not just because I flick quite quickly between the utopian and the dystopian depending on whether I've had my coffee. I find it very different to imagine the world, to think, planetarily, a hundred years in the future and, while at the same time acknowledging that that's a hugely important thing to do. So, when I think about the future, it tends to be through specific places or, even on quite a small scale of a single community or a single village. When I start thinking about planet Earth a hundred years in the future, it gets very apocalyptic very quickly, even though I don't think, generally, in apocalyptic terms. To give you an example, last week, I was socially distancing, but also

visiting my parents in the village where they live in the east of England, where many of the houses are hundreds of years old; you can actually see the evolution of this quite small dwelling of about 400 people across time. And in thinking about that, in a hundred years' time, I don't think it would have changed that much apart from maybe different sorts of vehicles on the high street, which itself only has one shop and one pub — two pubs, actually. But then, it's also in the east of England, which is one of the regions of the U.K. that's most at risk from flooding. I was thinking about this as I was walking across the beach there. But in many ways, it would be the same except some of it might be missing. And that was very kind of comforting and horrifying. We're so clued up into how to think [of] a kind of techno futurism. I can imagine the city of the future that might be if we were to build a city, [and] future-proof it for a hundred years' time. There are all sorts of interesting and engaging types of architectural and social practice and theory that helps us imagine what that [could look] like, but I find it quite hard to imagine what the city I grew up in — London — will look like in a hundred years' time. So, I think there's always this tension between thinking [about] the future, and thinking [about] it imaginatively as you described so well, Michelle, and thinking about the specificities of our local and global realities. To me, the main difference is, if I was thinking practically rather than aesthetically or imaginatively, [it] would be in transport, in agriculture and in energy production, and on the kind of transformations we'll see — [which] will be the sustainable projects — sustainable energy or projects on a scale that is kind of hitherto unseen, kind of like megasolar and megawind. And that isn't necessarily something that we should be completely positive about because we'll always have to be asking these questions about what are the future economics of these mega, techno-engineering projects. What will the ecological ramifications be on a planet that will be in some way warmer, and also thinking more positively, what types of emergent and diverse and celebrated ecosystems might arise in these change climates. And of course, there will be this intersection of the old and the new in a relatively densely populated country, like the U.K., let alone a city, a state like Hong Kong [special administrative region]. What sort of intersection between the old and the new, between the technological and the low-tech, between the ecological and the economic will we find. And so, when you ask what things are going to be like in 2084, or a hundred years in the future, the fact is, I don't really know. That was a long-winded way of saying that.

CB: Yeah, I agree. This is really interesting; it's the first time the three of us have had a conversation, and so, I'm finding it delightful and also somewhat eerie, the

overlaps in our thinking, especially the point that you make there about the flip between utopian and dystopian thinking on any given day. I have to say, in the U.S. right now, for me, it's hard to think. I have a really hard time, even if I can imagine what I would want a hundred years in the future to look like, I have a hard time believing that it will happen. Which is a sort of troubling thing to say for me because I am in various different ways committed to trying to make the world better, and yet, here we are in this moment, where on the Gulf Coast of this continent, there is a predicted storm surge coming that has been labeled “unsurvivable” by the National Weather Service, [unsurvivable storm surge from Hurricane Laura](#). It's obviously linked to climatological changes here in the Northeast. In the last decade, we've been hit by hurricanes that have come up the East Coast. Vermont is not known for its hurricane season but we're seeing more of them. So, when I think about what does — I really appreciate the way you framed it, Sam, that thinking locally is somewhat more straightforward than thinking at the scale of the globe. I think there's actually some interesting political history behind why it's easier for us to think locally around what stories came out of the [Cold War](#), for instance, about what a future looks like globally, and how these have seeped into our common narrative about what's possible. I think the migration patterns that are already happening because of climate change are going to vastly reshape what population centers look like (and they already have). They're going to change what rural places look like. What I'm thinking about right now is, for instance, there are a lot of people in cities on the East Coast who have access to wealth and are buying property in more rural areas because of the reality of the threat of coronavirus being higher in densely populated urban areas, and coronavirus is linked to climate change. Maybe it's not quite as direct as other things but it's fair to say that the impacts of this pandemic are related to and exacerbated by existing climatological stresses, I think. I would say that. I don't know if you all would agree.

SS: Seconded.

CB: Thanks for the vote of confidence there. So, we're already seeing migration out of one, think about California right now, folks getting evacuated again and again for wildfires; people's homes being destroyed again and again because it's a fire-dependent ecosystem, and the way that fire is being managed doesn't work for the ecosystem. Then, we have these catastrophic fires that destroy things and take lives. So, just thinking about the place-based risks that are in different places, and the place-based benefits. A place like California has great agricultural

soil. Vermont doesn't have great agricultural soil but we don't have massive wildfires. I have a bunch of farmer friends whose potato crops failed utterly this year across the Northeast. There's a blight. So, I'm thinking about food systems. I am working on a sort of small-scale track of optimism and hope in the context of building good relationships and working on noticing what can create the foundations of a livable future, a thriving future for as many people as possible, as many beings as possible. I find it really hard to think about that question. So, I also don't know. And I think that concept that you brought up, Sam, of future-proofing, wow, what a phrase, what a juicy thing to talk about. Thank you for the question, Michelle.

MKSF: My pleasure. I also think the three of us should somehow manage a coffee after this because every time I give a public presentation or lecture of my work someone always in the audience will ask if my works are dystopian or utopian. And my standard answer is, I think extreme utopian is dystopian, but I don't know where ecotopia stands.

SS: I think that's such a great thought, though, where do we locate the ecotopian, which I'm sure for some, a kind of ecotopian future might seem initially dystopian, although we might put them as the kind of adversaries of thriving. I love this idea of thriving that you brought up a couple of times, Charis. The ecotopian, wherever it is, it's not a stable thing. Thinking ecologically means consistently thinking about changing relations, changing relations between different sorts of organisms and different sorts of spaces and places. Utopia often seems quite static, and indeed, there's a reason why people prefer dystopian fiction to utopian fiction, generally; it's because utopianism in art can be a little bit boring. And it's actually the fractures where the dystopian emerges within the utopian or the utopian possibilities emerge out of what seems initially dystopian that become more interesting. Perhaps that's where we might locate our concept of the ecotopian.

MKSF: Think how scary it is to live in the [*Brave New World*](#).

SS: Yeah.

MKSF: God, I don't know if I want to live there.

SS: I think I wouldn't mind a holiday there, that was always my thought. So, Charis' entry for the book is *Plant Time*, and following Michelle, I kind of wanted to — once she came up with the idea of selecting your favorite sentence — I turned back to the book, and I've been rapidly flicking through the chapters. I've actually highlighted so many sentences, not all of which I'm going to do, but I think I found my two sentences amongst the many excellent sentences in this entry. So, *Plant Time* is a word that comes from some herbalists in North America, and I think these are two very revealing sentences in summarizing it. So, the first is that plant time is “a bodily practice that enacts a shift in the sensory attunements” — and that's a word I want to come back to: “attunement” — “of the herbalists' body as she approaches vegetally [as in plant] paced life.” And the second one, and I think it's really revealing, is that “If Western herbalists articulate their own experience of a world of boundaries, borders and notions of linear progress as a challenging one, characterized by the unstoppable cascade of calendar time, plant time [as opposed to calendar time], describes the slower, cyclical time-lives that our vegetal kin inhabit.” I really love this entry because it gives this idea of a vegetal mode of time where your concept is also kind of engaged with this idea of embodied practice. So, our responsibility to our vegetable kin becomes this mode of attunement, which I think is a lovely way of thinking not just about the relations or the way we kind of respond to plants and their secret lives, but how we might do that, how we might sit with our vegetable kin. And it reminds us that our idea, our notion of time is profound; this steady progress of Microsoft Outlook, inbox calendars that bombard us with emails, this relentless march into futurity for good or for ill is so profoundly anthropocentric in that there are these alternative epistemologies and concomitant ways of interacting that might help us negotiate or think or feel our way towards otherness; particularly, the otherness of plants. I guess because I'm always thinking about aesthetics, this entry provoked me to think about ways in which plants are represented in the foreground, and their time scales are represented in the foreground rather than being relegated as [a] passive background which humans move through. So, if you think of the tradition of landscape painting — someone walking across the landscape which is static and the alternate to that which are modes of representation that focus on the plants themselves. I was thinking about how I experienced a version of plant time when I was young, when I watched a famous nature documentary which is a little bit dated now: David Attenborough's [\[The\] Secret Life of Plants](#), and it extensively used time-lapse [technology]. You know, this was the early '90s. That seemed more novel then. Time-lapse photography and time-lapse film to really show you the

transformations in landscape both on a kind of dire novel level and a seasonal level. And ever since watching that, I've always had the sense of as a city boy whenever I go out into the fields or anything [that] the plants are always growing as I look at them, even though I know they're not, which I guess is my first real attunement to the nature of plant time. And the other thing that this entry really made me think about was how we need to register different scales — so, just as there's a different scale of temporality for plants, there's also a different spatial scale for one, for them, and not just individual plants but their modes of interconnection within an ecosystem, particularly, those sorts of symbiotic interconnections where we find, say, plants working with fungi; under the ground; we can't see that kind of massive level of symbiotic relations with our kind of anthropocentric spectacles on. So, I love this idea of, we need to attune ourselves to both the temporal and the spatial scales of nonhuman life and nonhuman flourishing, which is of course, our own flourishing, too. I'll move on to my questions for both of you. I guess this loosely relates to this idea of symbiosis, which is, do we hope for ourselves, or do we hope for others? And if we hope for others, which others do we hope for?

MKSF: Do we hope for ourselves or for others? That question made me think of one of the only two things that tell you the truth. The first one is your wedding vow. The other one is the safety announcement on the airplane. So, they always say, “Parents take care of yourself before you take care of your children and infants.” And I think this is the same attitude we should adopt for the flight of life. If we do not take care of ourselves, we do not have the right, or ability to take care of others. So, if we don't have hope for ourselves, how can we hope for others? And I'm going to share a little personal story with you, and I hope that would indirectly answer this question. Hong Kong is a highly, highly, highly consumer society. There are ads telling you to get a loan in order to go shopping all over the place. It's this consumer culture that drove me mad. And that quietly drove me to my current environmental artworks. So, at one point, a few years ago, I stopped using plastic bags, completely. And one time, I asked my mother to bring me a pair of shoes from home, and my mother is the type of person who thinks one plastic bag around your food is not clean enough. You need a plastic bag and then another plastic bag to protect from the first plastic bag and then a third plastic bag to protect from the second plastic bag. And then on top of that, you use a plastic carrying bag to carry all your three plastic bags. So, when she brought me the pair of shoes, I was shocked. She wrapped this pair of used shoes in newspaper. And then in a cloth bag. And I said, “Oh, isn't that too dirty?” My

mother said, “Well, I know plastic bags, bad, right?” and that was that. But what I wanted to say in this convoluted way is when you hope for yourself, when you change for yourself, you are hoping and changing for other people. So, it starts with yourself.

CB: That's a really great illustration of that. Thank you, Michelle. I appreciate that a lot, and thinking about this relationship between caring for the self and caring for others, I was thinking as you were speaking about how the two are intertwined. I don't think of them as separate acts. One of the things I do as an educator is I run experiential education programs. Part of them at least, often, goes out into the wilderness or into trekking or hiking situations, and especially in those contexts, one of the things we say to the youth on these programs is, “Self-care is group care” because it is. If we can figure out what it means to take care of ourselves, not just the obvious food, water, shelter. Those are really important, especially with youth, reminding them to eat and drink water is really important. But also, beyond that, what each of us on the planet, each of the humans on the planet has different specific needs. Some people prefer to be alone most of the times, and nurture themselves that way. And some people really have a hard time being alone and thrive with more company and more interaction. And knowing that kind of thing about ourselves seems really important for figuring out what does group care look like in conversation with self-care. I love that you brought up this question of care with the question of hope because I think they are totally intertwined. Thank you, Michelle. The idea of self-care has been largely sucked into this consumer culture that you were referencing, not just in Hong Kong, but in any place that has a consumer economy and enough people with enough access to wealth that they can do things like buy a bubble bath. That's sort of the classic example now of what self-care is, like, oh, go take a bubble bath or have a glass of wine or, get some good chocolate; these are the things that get marketed to me. Not so much anymore because I click them as inappropriate on my social media feeds. But the things that get marketed are not necessarily group care-oriented self-care. Don't get me wrong, I love a bubble bath, and at the same time, that's not the kind of care that shifts us towards collective care as practices for our fellow humans and for other than humans as part of nature. So, rethinking humaneness as nature and not thinking of it as separate is really important and thinking about what does it mean to hope and what does it mean to care — practice care as active hope for ourselves and for one another. I don't separate the question of do we hope for ourselves and do we hope for others because they are related as you said, Michelle.

MKSF: Thank you for saying that, Charis.

CB: I have the pleasure of engaging more fully with Michelle's work of art titled, *Nahual*. Michelle was responding to Carolyn Fornoff's essay [by the same title]. I'll just describe [this artwork] for folks that are not looking at it now. It's nine eye sockets of critically endangered animals that are layered within each other. They share a pupil, and the pupil is looking out through these nine sockets directly at the viewer and there's different textures of skin around these eye sockets, or fur or hair. One of the things Michelle says in her artist statement is: "Most humans alive today are distant from nonhuman animals, except for domesticated pets and dead flesh packaged as calories. Nahual [as a loanword] offers an alternative way to think of our relationship with animals, one that is less arrogant, less certain, and more humble." As I was engaging with this work, one of the things that occurred to me was that I wanted to read [Carolyn] Fornoff's piece. One short sentence from Fornoff's piece is that she says our self is also that of another. It's not only creating this relationship between the viewer and these nine animals who are looking out, but also implying all the other sets of relationships that are outside of that. I'm just going to respond, sort of together with Sam's piece — because he highlights the fact that the word "apocalypse" means unveiling or uncovering or revealing — and Michelle's work of art here has a total of nine veils, which reminds me somewhat of [Salome](#). But these nine veils are the eyelids of these critically endangered animals, which in this case, are all open, gazing at the viewer. It really highlighted for me the difference, the distinction between a human gaze and an animal gaze and what kinds of power are inherent in whose different gazes. I'm curious for Michelle, how does the mutually exchanged gaze of this work — which does imply multiple bodies that are across or adjacent or regarding each other — how does it take up this question, or this matter of Carolyn Fornoff's, the implication that our bodies are always also other bodies, our self is that of another? I'm thinking here also of the introduction to the [Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet](#), which is edited by Heather Swanson, Anna Tsing and some other excellent folks. And the title of that introduction is *Bodies Tumbled into Bodies*, so even here in the title of that is a sense of separateness that's encompassed in relatedness or oneness or togetherness. So, one of my questions is, how do you think more about this Michelle? And the other question I have is sort of for both of you, which is that — Sam, your piece invites us into the possibilities of simultaneous fracture or crisis and possibility or redirecting. And I want to ask you both in the context of this work and your broader work in

the context of coronavirus and global uprisings against fascism, what is uncovered, where are the possibilities in the fractures?

MKSF: Well, thank you Charis, for your question. In her article, Fornoff describes nahualism as one spirit occupying more than one body, both human and nonhuman. And there is no hierarchy between the two. For me, my visual piece responding to this written piece is another way of leveling the playing field because we are so used to looking at the world tainted by our own spectacles, whether it's minorities, whether it's the mainstream looking at minorities, or us humans looking at nonhumans. And like I mentioned in the artist statement, I think, we never, ever look eye-to-eye into an animal except [with] our pets, or when you are threatened by a predator. I bet 99.99% of human beings in this world have never gazed into an eye of an endangered animal. So, for me to be able to gaze into their eye[s] and for them to be able to respond back with their gaze is a way of flattening that hierarchy. I think 2020 is a year that exposes all the social problems. I think COVID[-19] just pushed all our social problems onto the surface, and to the extreme, whether it is poverty, whether it is health care or the lack of, whether it is social inequality, distribution of wealth, whether it's gender inequality, everything is coming out. I don't know what is the whole end, and of course, I do not have the solution. But I think what we should strive for is the balance, which is what I am currently thinking about for my own works as well. Northlandia is a surreal, Arctic tale of the precarious balance between human greed, and the magical landscape between the North and the rest of the world, and between self-preservation and the rapidly changing climate. And if you take out the word "Northlandia," the imaginary country in my works, this describes our world today. It's all about the balance, and how do we achieve that.

SS: One of the things emerging from this conversation is how much I want to go and work for Michelle's back catalog of artworks.

CB: I agree.

SS: Which sound amazing. It's a real doozy of a question, Charis, you know, the sense of what's being uncovered. And what's being fractured and what practices of hope do we notice in that uncovering or fracturing. And I guess one way of thinking about it, one hopeful way, is that what's being uncovered is possibility itself, in all its manifold forms. I know that sounds super wishy-washy and abstract, but when you talk about fracturing, that's crucial because what's being

fractured is the sense of the status quo, which manifests in different ways in different parts of the globe. But in many ways, a late-capitalist status quo in what is the period that we might call the Anthropocene is disastrous; it's ecocidal, it's what [Paul \[B.\] Preciado calls the necropolitical](#), “the politics of death,” with massive inequality with climate change, with ecological despoliation. So, that fracturing itself is crucial because then, we get the emergence of the unexpected, the emergence of possibility. And that can happen really, really quickly in ways that catch us by surprise or catch many people by surprise, thinking about even what's been going on in the last weeks and months — protest[s], people taking to the streets, whether that's in Wisconsin, or in Bristol, or in Belarus. But that kind of fracturing and emergence does not necessarily equate to hope. For that to become hope rather than defiance, you need a process whereby these kind of upswellings, this feeling of communal outrage — which can make us aware of possibilities for kinship or community or resistance that we haven't seen — they also have to meet and kind of interbreed with or intersect with actual practice, actual policy so that we can have sustained action, and sustained change. They have to meet concepts and ways of thinking and doing, but also circulating. So, if you think about this very powerful notion about abolishing the police in the U.S.A., or the movement towards decolonizing the curriculum and the education system within the U.K., you get the intersection of fracturing and outrage with a kind of more sustained evolution of concepts and ways of doing; and it's their intersection which is powerful, and which will also be met by counterresistance from the hierarchies of established power. And I think on a personal level, when we think about the possibilities in these fractures, the way we get those fractures is by having ways of thinking and doing that help us outside our quotidian, boring, often closed-in ways of seeing. So, if individually and collectively we end up feeling stuck, then we need practices that open us up individually and socially. That's why for me, the arts have always been crucial, including the powerfully imaginative works that Michelle seems to be engaged in, to have Northlandia so we can through this imaginative space redream, or rethink, or reinterrogate where we are in the present. And, alongside art, it's activism, it's volunteer work. It's anything that disrupts our process of living, which can seem so hemmed in and stuck by the kind of necessities of working, and indeed, just surviving and against that, we need the thrill and the fear of this fracturing. That's why one of the things I wrote about in *Apocalypso* was the feeling of being at a protest because when we're at a protest, it's so different. Watching it on screen, we sense this almost bodily camaraderie, but also this extreme precarity, this awareness of precarity of the frailty. Not just of our individual bodies, but also the social

structures that we exist within, which can be changed even if we feel that we can't. Also, the precarity of our dreams and hopes. It's constantly working with all those different determining factors that makes this process of fracturing really important if we are to see any profound or sustained change beyond the individual. Charis, if we're just opening up the conversation, one of the questions I wanted to ask is what makes you feel hopeful, and I want to ask about your experiences in both education and activism and do those sponsor a feeling of hope within your day-to-day.

CB: That's a good question. The first book about teaching that ever made me feel like I actually had a place in teaching was [Bell Hooks' *Teaching to Transgress*](#).

SS: Oh, it's so great.

CB: Yeah, and in it, she talks about teaching as a practice of radical love. And, because teachers are humans and students are humans, we don't always feel that radical love in the moment, but generally speaking, that is what teaching feels like to me. Any kind of creating an educational space. I think opening up a space for learning, at its best, is always a learning together, and that always feels hopeful to me, to create the possibility of awareness that we are each responsible for our lives and we are each always in connection with the lives and learning of those around us, not even just in the classroom — in my neighborhood, in my town, in my online communities. [Karen Barad](#) and [Donna Haraway](#) bring up this question of responsibility at the quantum level that I think is really key to thinking about what kind of practices of hope are inherent in teaching and education spaces. So, that's what I try to feel into when I'm in those spaces to remind myself that I am also a human on the planet. And that means I am imperfect and I don't know everything, and I have something to learn from the people that are here with me, whoever they are, and I also have something to share. And so, sort of trying to dismantle the idea that one person has all the knowledge is really at the core of that practice — teaching as a practice of love, and of hope.

SS: Thanks for that, as we approach a new term as educators. At a trying time at best.

MKSF: Another Zoom term.

SS: Yeah, another Zoom term. I mean, having a reminder that we're not service providers providing the commodity of education to our students. But rather, this inherent community and responsibility that's integral to teaching and learning and the teaching and learning of both staff and students even within the sorts of inevitable hierarchies (that however much we try to dismantle them exists to a certain extent within classrooms) — is a good 2:30 p.m. pep talk for me. At the end of this call, I've got to carry on planning my syllabus. You mentioned [[Donna Haraway](#)]; she's got that idea of "[kinnovating](#)," thinking about what our kin are [on] a human and a nonhuman level but also kind of innovating in our forms of kinship. That can be as much ecological in the conventional sense practice but it can also very much be an educational one, and how we think about our role as educators. Once you don't, you are kind of enablers rather than transmitters of knowledge.

CB: Absolutely.

MKSF: I'm really glad Sam and Charis brought this up because this echoes what I was thinking, and there was a suggested question that starts with "ecotopian must [...]." And my response to that is ecotopian must not become a pet project of the bourgeoisie. As us three sitting here discussing big ideas, discussing this beautiful printed book with our fancy machines, speaking fluent English across three continents, we have to remember that there are children right now around the world who cannot afford Zoom lessons because they don't have personal computers, they don't have access to Wi-Fi, or they're too embarrassed to show their home settings or their homes are too noisy. A lot of these children are even losing their only meal, the school lunch. So, we have to remember that this world is shared by people who are not us, and also shared by animals and plants who are also clearly not us.

CB: Thank you for that reminder, Michelle. That's certainly the case with the Zoom, the lack of access to Wi-Fi and computers in a number of small, rural communities here in Vermont, and across this continent. So, what are the ways that we entwine this reimagining into the concrete material problems of class, and of race, and of gender, and of governance?

SS: One thing that this feeds into that I think about a lot and is become foregrounded through the process of the pandemic is the way that structures of government will flip things into a question of individual capacity or individual

moral choices — which should not be so — which are ultimately, systemic and structural issues. The classic example being with climate change, the bourgeoisie approach [is] you read a book like *An Ecotopian Lexicon*, you decide to eat less meat, but that does nothing to the real, profound structural inequalities to do with the reduction of food or greenhouse gas emissions to link to agriculture, and elsewhere. What Michelle said is a really important and profound reminder that for every kind of aspect of conceptual change or aesthetic approach, there has to be concomitant-related changes within practice and within policy. And I think it's the profound radical changes in policy which too often fall not even at the last hurdle but at the first one. I suppose we're seeing this to a certain degree with the current unrest in the States. People think so much about interpersonal racism that they do not think about the structures and the policies and the technologies. Thinking about the relation between those different aspects, between people's access to technologies for good or for ill, whether they are laptops or AR-15s is itself part of how we extend our conceptual changes into real-world practice.

MKSF: I agree with you, I echo that.

CB: I also agree. What I hear there is the real emphasis from both of you on the difference between individual essentially consumer choices around changing approaches to climate and climatological needs and interventions at the level of governance policy, corporate management, etc. I think that relationship between the individual and the larger structures is absolutely key. I'm just thinking about how — I don't know, maybe this is something that I would ask you, too, Michelle. I think about the ways that I have made consumer choices knowing that they're essentially futile. I don't use plastic bags, either, but I also know that my personal choice not to use plastic bags is a choice that is not only available to me because of histories of class, and etc. I can afford other ways of buying things. I can buy in bulk, etc. And I also know that the problem is actually not just individual plastic bag consumption.

MKSF: I think it's not just about consumer choices. I think it comes down to your belief, attitude and ideology that fuel and drive all your life choices. I mean, Charis, if I tell you, you're a Ph.D. and all your hard work, all your study, all those sleepless nights would not make a difference in your life, would you have done it? If I know my plastic bag would not make a difference, would I do it? I think sometimes we do things in life because we really believe in it. If my project will amount to nothing — no one will ever look at my art and no one will like it — will

I still continue doing it? Yes, I will continue making my works because that's what I believe in. And I think it's this strong belief that drives our actions, and eventually, your strong sense of belief, and that is manifested in your actions; [it] will change people, will change the world, whether it's a very small universe like your mother, or a universe that involves more people. We don't know but I believe you should do what you believe in.

CB: Yeah, I totally agree. And that brings me back to this thing you said in your piece about being less certain. We actually can't know what the effects of our individual choices will be. So, what you're describing essentially is not using plastic bags as a practice of hope.

MKSF: Yeah, I think it's a manifestation of my belief and hope. You can say that.

CB: That's certainly why I teach. I can't guarantee that the students will come away with this deeper understanding of the relationship between individuals and structures when it comes to systems of power. But that is my hope. And I have to do it because that's one of the things in teaching that I'm committed to trying to offer people.

SS: That's also one of the nice things about teaching. You ultimately don't know what people will take away from your class. That's much more hopeful than knowing that they'd be able to list 10 important ways that hegemonic masculinity has been deconstructed in literary theory in the last decade; it's not a particularly hopeful thing in and of itself, but you hope that things catch on and mutate in their minds and practices in different ways at different times. Always knowing what's going to happen can be productive of despair; it limits our notion of what is presently possible. It can sponsor or endorse a knowing cynicism, which itself is [an] inertial drag on possibility, on hope, and the sense that you don't know what might happen, which is not quite the same as ignoring statistics and data and stuff like that. I'm pro-statistics and data and thinking about them hard, but also, it's this crucial thing of being able to have a sense that the unexpected might arise, that things might be better. But they will be better in a way that we have not yet necessarily dreamed of, or thought of.

CB: If there's anything that 2020 has taught us, it's that the unexpected will arise. I'm just looking back at the notes that we made together before this conversation, and I'm noticing that Michelle highlighted the sense of wonder that

was important to her in Sam's piece. And Sam, you mentioned this idea of this book as a spell book. And so, I wonder if that uncertainty also rests in that sense of wonder, curiosity and the sense that we can weave spells for a different world.

SS: Yeah, that's the great thing about casting spells is you can conjure something up but you never quite know what it is that's going to be conjured. If we learn nothing from [The Sorcerer's Apprentice](#), spells themselves aren't under our control.

MKSF: With the dire sense of environmental doom, how does one make any life decisions from small lifestyle decisions such as diet and travels to having children, or not?

SS: So, the first answer honestly, I would say that I make decisions badly and inconsistently, but with a consistent hope that I can do better. There's lots of things that I've decided — I'm going to be vegan or I'm not going to fly — that I fail at. That failure sometimes makes me become super cynical because, well, if I can't do it [who can?]. Not that I'm particularly good at sticking to anything, and that itself is quite an arrogant thought, but I think if you get to make these decisions, which can seem quite doomy, you also have to ask yourself, where can the joy be accessed? A sense of doom can be an important spur to stop the apocalyptic but you need a sense of joy as well. You need bread but you also need roses.

CB: Thank heavens, you mentioned joy and pleasure because I also have no idea how to make choices right now. I'll just be honest. I did choose a few years ago not to have any biological children. And that was partially about climate change and partially about other things. But that choice — the choice itself is deeply fraught with other people's opinions about women and bodies and children and the world. So, I think it's not just about this sense of environmental doom; it's that any choice that we're making, especially if it's one that goes against the status quo, comes with a social price tag on it and consequences. Pretty consistently, people used to ask me when I was going to have children, and why I chose not to when I would tell them I chose not to. And I feel like that in particular, is not something anyone should need to justify — or diet — these particular [choices] that you raised in the question. But I think back to the matter of joy. I've learned a lot from [Adrienne Maree Brown and the Emergent Strategy Ideation Institute](#) about what it might mean to refocus decision-making, and change work towards

pleasure and joy, to ask ourselves, what would it mean if we were not only fighting against the things that are wrong and bad, but fighting for pleasure, fighting for a world where people have access to pleasure and joy. And so, these days, I think about a lot of my choices through that lens to say, rather than making a decision that is only based on will this help me survive, will this be good for the world or bad for the world, good for my local ecosystem or bad for my local ecosystem. Thinking about those things but also then weaving in the question of how much pleasure and joy, and for whom will each of my choices enable. It's not an easy calculus to make but none of these are.

MKSF: I would like to answer my own question with a graphic novel I quote in almost every public presentation I give, including this one. It's by [Philippe Squarzoni](#). The title is *Climate Changed, A Personal Journey Through the Science*. It's an autobiographical, graphic novel of this comic artist who gets an assignment on climate change. The narrative has two parallel streams, two parallel narratives. One is himself, interviewing a group of experts on climate change; very informative, very academic; could be a bit dry, could be a little bit difficult to understand. And then, there's also the personal narrative, which is his own journey throughout this project that eventually changes his own life and his life decisions. One, he is in a committed relationship and because of this project, he decides not to take any travels, except for once a year with his girlfriend, so he doesn't completely deprive his partner of pleasures in life. What really, really touched me is towards the end, he decides to attend a comic festival. So, throughout the book, he has turned down many international invitations to attend comic festivals, exhibitions, international cultural exchange events because he wants to reduce his carbon footprint. And eventually, he decides to attend a festival in the neighboring country — I forgot whether it's France or Belgium — because instead of taking the plane, he can take a train and a ferry and other obscure transportation methods. That dramatically reduces his carbon footprint even though it takes way longer, and that's how he justifies attending this festival, fulfilling and achieving his professional potentials while also protecting the environment. And every time I think back on this, I ask myself, am I willing to turn down important, professional opportunities so that I can take care of the environment. And I would be honest with you. If this were not the COVID[-19] year, I would not be in Hong Kong right now. And I would be traveling to three, five, seven countries this year and probably, so would both of you. So, I don't have an answer; this moment in the book is one that I constantly think back on because what am I giving up in order to take care of this planet?

SS: I'm really glad you mentioned that book Michelle, because that is on the great list of books that are currently staring at me from my bookshelf.

MKSF: It's amazing. I quote it all the time, and you can tell me what country he's actually traveling to, I never remember.

CB: I'm really excited to engage more with both of your work and I'd love to know, Michelle, where I can find your artwork and connect with you more.

MKSF: Thank you, Charis. Well I think the easiest is way through Instagram. You can follow my journey. The Instagram handle is [@michelleksfung](#) or you can go to my website, which is [michelleksfung.com](#).

SS: Charis, I have loved this conversation, *Plant Time* and everything else. Where can we find out more about you and your amazing practice?

CB: Thanks, Sam. The best way to find me is at my website: [charisboke.com](#). I'm also on Instagram under my name, but more of my work is available there at my website. How about you Sam?

SS: I think the best way to find out about me and my work is through my profile on the [University of Liverpool's website](#). You can probably get that just by typing my name — Sam Solnick — I'm also on Twitter at [@samsolnick](#). And I should also just quickly plug the University of Liverpool's literature and science hub — which is an initiative and center at which I work at the University of Liverpool: you can find out about us on Twitter [@litscihub](#).

MKSF: Thank you so much.

CB: Thank you all, this is really lovely.

Host altro: For more information, visit [ecotopianlexicon.com](#).

This conversation has been lightly edited for clarity.