

**The Challenging Precarity Global network:  
Conference on ‘Planetary Precarity and Future Habitability’  
February 18-19, 2022**

The international Challenging Precarity: A Global Network (founded in 2017), like many other societies and organisations during the last two years of lockdowns, drew on its current networking affiliations and institutional resources to hold a dynamic and successful online conference on ‘Planetary Precarity and Future Habitability’ in February. Hosted by the School of Liberal Arts and School of Management, at Bennett University, India, and convened by the organisers, network chair, Janet Wilson, Emerita Professor of English and Postcolonial Studies, University of Northampton, UK, and vice Chair, Om Prakash Dwivedi, Associate Professor of English, Bennett University, and network member, Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp, Professor of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures at the University of Bonn, Germany, this two day event attracted a range of emerging and leading scholars working in the environmental humanities. The topic centrally addressed the network’s concerns with environmental precarity, species extinction and above all, with the survival and habitability of the planet.

Highlighting the urgency of the environmental crisis, and by way of providing political and social contexts the CFP referred to the impact of neoliberalism in creating environmental catastrophe as well as precarious labour. It pointed to the widespread consensus that urgent change is needed to deal with climate change: for example, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’ demands for a Green New Deal and other demands for public policy to support job creation in the transition to renewable energy, and reduce economic inequality. The conference topic acknowledged existing debates and political responses: UN Secretary General, António Guterres’s claim that the world is on a knife edge in the race to halt accelerating climate change and that 2021 was a ‘make or break’ year; Greta Thunberg’s demands for national collective action, ahead of the 26th UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Glasgow in November 2021. Key arguments for the environmental movement, and voices calling for planetary care and repair were cited: Achille Mbembe, who urges decolonization on a planetary scale and to “reconstruct the world in common” (or “to reinvent forms of life in common that go beyond the requisite of the nation state, ethnicity, race, religion, and so on” (2019, online)), Amitav Ghosh, who situates the global crises in the flawed notion of modernity and selective progress (2016), and Rob Nixon whose definition a decade ago of neoliberal violence as slow but cumulatively damaging (2011) still remains influential .

Papers and presentations probed topics and concepts as varied as a queer utopian vision of ecology, planetary catastrophe and disaster, apocalypse and the affective dimension of precarity; reading and writing as eco-translational practices to consider the limits of thinking back through humanist ideals and thinking forward to the need for more-than-human storytelling projects; the rise of planetary nuclear precarity and anti-nuclear campaigns; Emily Apter’s concept of planetary dysphoria and the planet as an object to be mourned, the zero waste lifestyle as an alternative to environmental degradation.

One debate considered the relevant merits of poetry or fiction as the most appropriate and effective response to the environmental crisis, while another delegate asked ‘How can ecocritical narratives imagine more holistic and sustainable planetary futures, given the socio-ecological scale of problems of the Anthropocene’?

Various literary and visual genres and representations were explored in considering how to repair current planetary damage, build resilience and avoid future disaster. For example, how to evaluate Anthropocentric thought and disrupt power structures by reinterpreting heteronormative categories of ‘nature’ and the ‘human’; James Bond movies and environmental injustice in the Global South; how diverse textual imaginings of the apocalyptic *Snowpiercer* (2013) story illustrate human vulnerability in the attempt to survive in a postapocalyptic world; in the genre of petrofiction, the environmentally calamitous effects of oil extraction on local populations in Ogoniland and their collective resilience; the entanglement of human and non-human actors contributing to a renegotiation of agency and hence a move towards planetary solidarity through the lens of fiction; the value of eco-poetry in rendering the complexity and multiplicity of environmental issues by contrast to the novel, and what poet-thinkers like the Canadian Peter Sanger have to tell us about the urgent need to protect the Earth and its life forms, that life (not *homo sapiens*) is the *raison d’être* of the biosphere; pandemic fiction as inspiring mindfulness, and as a potential facilitator of critical self-reflection and a vigilant sense of precarity. The section ‘Indigenous Narratives and Environmental Crisis’, considered the argument, also presented by Jason Moore in his keynote address, that contemporary global precarity emanates from past colonial ecological disruptions in native societies, in response to which indigenous stories today offer alternative solutions to those of western societies, as well as indigenous knowledge that may promote environmental justice. Precarity, in Wai Chee Dimock’s presentation, is a condition for resilience as much as hardship; she turns to native American Indian resilience during the pandemic as an example of how to establish that reparative agency is possible.

Two panels considered aesthetics responses in art, music, dance, literature and performance, to the planetary emergency caused by global warming: ‘Art and (Audio)Visual Aesthetics of Environmental Crisis Planetary’ looked at the forms of art as reframing of nature, artistic interventions as a rhetoric of preservation, and tonic artworks of Antarctica’s melting ice, striving to perpetuate hope ; while the panel ‘Survival Aesthetics: New Forms of Collaborative Art and Media Practices’ , presented experimental collaborative methodologies of dance and performance, using Dalit trance and possession techniques as sea methodologies, transmarine immersive pedagogies in the Venetian Lagoon; the artist Roni Horn’s shifting waters of Iceland, and the role of science fiction and the populist media in imagining a more just world.

The conference was distinguished by four outstanding keynote talks

Wai Chee Dimock (Yale University)

“Habitable Precarity: Salmon and the Indigenous Food Cycle”

Sharae Deckard (University College, Dublin)

“Precarious Work: The Labour and Ecology of Social Reproduction in World-Literature”

Gabriele Schwab (University of California, Irvine)

“Precarious Boundaries: Reflections on Transspecies Imaginaries”

Jason W. Moore (Binghamton University, New York)

“Planetary Justice and the Planetary Proletariat”

Although the virtual medium of presentations and exchange prevented the usual conference ice-breaking socialising based on face-to-face panels and get togethers in between sessions, the general enthusiasm and collegiality made this a memorable occasion -- one marked by the sharing of new ideas and research, passionate concern for the environmental future, elevated by excellent questions and the chance to debate and consider solutions for crucially important issues for our times.

Janet M. Wilson

Chair, Challenging Precarity: A Global Network (<https://challengingprecarity.network>)