

THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO LITERATURES AND CRISIS

Edited by Silvia Pellicer-Ortín, Julia Kuznetski and Chiara Battisti
Routledge, 2025

<https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_misc/mj.202511894>

CRISTINA DE LOS RÍOS MARTÍN

Universidad de Zaragoza

cdelosrios@unizar.es

<<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-6603-0306>>

Crisis has become a defining framework of our times (Han 2024). In a world characterised by global turmoil, literature has consistently surfaced as both a mirror of the proliferation of crises and a catalyst for change. Within this context, *The Routledge Companion to Literatures and Crisis*, edited by Silvia Pellicer-Ortín, Julia Kuznetski and Chiara Battisti, examines the role of literature in both recording and responding to different crises from a wide range of disciplines and perspectives. First published in 2025, this substantial volume presents a compelling and timely account of literature's enduring significance in times of crisis. The editors' combined expertise ensures a broad yet interconnected approach to the intersections between literatures and crisis. Considering the globalised and interconnected nature of the world, the volume acknowledges an impressive array of cultural and academic perspectives. In fact, one of the strengths of the collection is the comprehensive approach of the 42 chapters, highlighting the varying impacts of crises depending on their geographical and historical context.

The volume opens with an introduction that contextualises the subject matter. The terms *polycrisis* and *permacrisis* immerse readers in the landscape of contemporary crises. The former refers to multiple crises affecting our current society, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the climate emergency, and the latter describes a state of prolonged instability. Both concepts reflect the complex, interconnected and persistent nature of contemporary global challenges, depicting how crises are not isolated disruptions, but long-term, overlapping systemic problems. The introduction also provides insight into the intrinsic complexities of the word crisis.

It does so by first addressing its etymology, and second by considering its meaning in other languages, with a focus on Chinese, mainly due to the particularly nuanced understanding of crisis in this language as both “danger” and a “crucial point”. This linguistic approach concludes that it is imperative to understand the term as both a critical point and a transformative force. This initial opening framework also introduces essential terms and fields of study, for instance, visibility, relationality and vulnerability. Visibility is addressed in terms of focusing on both large- and small-scale crises as well as taking diverse cultural and historical perspectives into account. Relationality is also a recurring concept, as crises are best understood when considered as part of an interconnected whole, rather than focusing on single or seemingly unrelated events. Relationality is actually highlighted by the notion of vulnerability; drawing from Butler, lives are not seen as isolated, but interwoven with the lives of others (2012: 141). In times of crisis, this interdependency is naturally highlighted, as the condition of being vulnerable makes us turn to each other for support.

The volume is structured into two well-defined parts. Part I, *Addressing crises through literature*, encapsulates the theory and genre analysis that frame the representation of crisis in literature. Part II, *Crisis in literatures across the world*, explores how crises manifest across different cultural and historical contexts, through the analysis of case studies. The first two chapters of Part I.I, *Theoretical approaches to crises*, authored by Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega, respectively, set a strong foundation for the volume, highlighting the essential role of literature in representing and addressing crisis. Ganteau’s chapter addresses pressing issues, such as time, visibility and vulnerability, which are further explored and developed throughout the volume. With the example of contemporary British fiction in general, and the genre of climate fiction in particular, Ganteau contends that literature enables time to slow down. This is particularly relevant in the current fast-paced society, where time-saving technologies paradoxically coexist with a widespread sense of urgency. Onega’s chapter further reveals the ethical role of literature in not only helping readers process crises, but also encouraging an active engagement. She also highlights literature’s potential to represent unrepresentable events. The argument that crises are understood through their relationship with past events is also particularly insightful, as it underscores the role of relationality in shaping contemporary responses to crisis, which is also dealt with in later chapters. The next three chapters delve into theoretical considerations on contemporary crises of war, violence, migration and terrorism. Michael C. Frank (Chapter 3) focuses on the discourse employed by contemporary political narratives when dealing with the war on terror, drawing attention to the mechanisms through which events are presented selectively. Merve Sarıkaya-Şen (Chapter 4) focuses on migration, offering a theoretical background on the term and approaching crises

as thresholds, in the sense that they are both dividing and connecting forces, an idea that deeply resonates with the meaning of crisis as both a critical moment and an opportunity, stated in the introduction and echoed throughout the volume. Also dealing with migration, Sue Vice (Chapter 5) effectively highlights the tensions between migration and forced displacement. Refugee literature is analysed in terms of how it challenges traditional narrative structures, emphasising hybrid forms that deepen our understanding of the representation of crises in literature. Chapter 6, co-authored by Lisa Baraitser and Laura Salisbury, provides a theoretical linkage between crisis and care, emphasising collective interdependence and relational temporalities. Chapter 7, by Gala Arias Rubio, serves as a conclusion for the first section, offering a thought-provoking theoretical discussion on climate crisis and its historical representation in literature. It identifies “propositive narratives” as an emerging narrative form focused on climate change, arguing that, unlike other narratives that concentrate mostly on apocalyptic views, this form offers a fresh perspective on climate discourse, highlighting a hopeful vision that is significantly evoked throughout the volume.

The next section, I.II *Literary genres and crises*, sheds light on the different forms and genres through which crisis can be represented and engaged. Paul Majkut (Chapter 8) focuses on mediaeval and Renaissance drama and the way it has historically engaged with different physical, spiritual and moral crises. This specific focus brings our attention to how past crises still resonate with contemporary struggles. Ivan Armstrong turns to poetry in Chapter 9, underscoring this genre’s capacity to transcend time and space when capturing and evoking crises. Non-fiction is addressed in chapters 10 and 11 by Silvia Pellicer-Ortín and Julia Kuznetski, respectively. The former offers a historical overview of life-writing narratives, connecting them to the concept of crisis, and reflects on concepts, such as *scriptotherapy* or the paradigm of Transmodernity, which provide valuable perspectives when reframing crisis as a transformative opportunity. Kuznetski’s chapter addresses how women writers use the essay form to engage with crucial issues in our society, such as the climate emergency, technology and AI or systemic inequalities. Chapter 12, by Chiara Battisti, delves into the visual form of graphic narratives, providing a broad and accurate account of the gutter—the space left between panels—highlighting its role in both making the reader engaged with the story and evoking the fragmentation brought about by crisis. In a similar line, Ieva Astahovska explores visual forms in Chapter 13, particularly the role of art in addressing burning issues such as the climate crisis, by looking at artistic works that convey, for instance, the disappearance of native plants. The first part of the volume concludes with Chapter 14, in which Raphael Kabo looks at science fiction, described as a defining form for crisis, addressing issues such as capitalist expansion, ecological collapse and neoliberal alienation.

The second part of the volume is divided into three sections, the first of which — II.I, *Political and ideological crises in a historical perspective*— delves into how literature has played a role in articulating, challenging and influencing different politics and ideologies. Fabio Forner (Chapter 15) focuses on 15th century literature to address its potential when mediating political tensions, especially through rhetorical skills. Harvey Wiltshire (Chapter 16) highlights how Shakespeare's plays subtly engage with the Elizabethan succession crisis at a time when open discussion of the issue was forbidden. Ian Ward (Chapter 17), also drawing on Shakespeare's oeuvre, examines how depictions of Elizabeth Sawyer's case and Shakespeare's portrayal of witches in Jacobean England contributed to the intensification of the demonic crisis during the period. Paul Majkut (Chapter 18) discusses how crises in 1666, proclaimed as the *annus mirabilis* by John Dryden, led to a transformation in literary production and a more realistic and naturalistic writing style. Leif Dahlberg (Chapter 19) analyses the literary production of the Myrdals and how their rhetorical construction of crisis contributed to shaping political arguments. Lastly, Robert Eaglestone (Chapter 20) examines the influence of the UK's Brexit-driven polarisation in literature, ultimately underscoring how writing can become a polarised medium itself, as it may reflect deepening divides.

The next section, II.II *War, migration and violence*, examines these intertwined themes and their pervasive presence from different forms and cultural perspectives. Eva Pérez Rodríguez (Chapter 21) provides a broad historical overview of the representation of war in the context of the British Isles. Emrah Atasoy (Chapter 22) turns to Turkish speculative fiction, linking gender inequality and domestic violence to the environment and the climate crisis. Helena Duffy (Chapter 23) explores the representation of the Holocaust in French literature, focusing on the ambivalent trope of the dog to reflect both humanisation and dehumanisation. Film narratives are also included when exploring war and violence in literature, in this case with Cecilia Beecher's take on the film *Belfast* (Chapter 24). Ilya Kukulin (Chapter 25) underscores the profound impact of state politics on Russophone literature, particularly following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Finally, Piret Viies (Chapter 26) explores war in Estonian literature, focusing on different genres, such as punk poetry and the novel, among which the striking case of Leo Kunnas's novel *War 2023* (2016) could be highlighted, as it eerily predicted elements of Russia's future aggression.

The third section, II.III *Values and identity crises*, explores the intersections of these issues across diverse cultural and political contexts. Ksenia Shmydkaya (Chapter 27) highlights the tension between utopian idealism and the practical realities of achieving such ideals. Noelia Núñez (Chapter 28) turns to limit-case

texts and media narratives dealing with the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on domestic violence and its representations in Spanish literature. Alexander Dmitriev (Chapter 29) explores the complex relationship between cultural memory and national identity in Ukraine and Russia, especially in the context of the ongoing war, and the narratives that shape each nation's identity. Ivan Stacy (Chapter 30) examines contemporary Chinese literature through the lens of affective crisis, drawing attention to literary representations of liminal states of consciousness. The liminality of consciousness evokes the notion of the threshold, already mentioned, and further developed in the next chapters and beyond. Izabel Brandão (Chapter 31) puts Brazilian women writers in the spotlight, examining heterotopic novels that approach the body as a border. The next two chapters by Bárbara Arizti (Chapter 32) and Eugenia Ossana (Chapter 33) focus on environmental injustice and Indigenous peoples' perspectives. Arizti draws attention to hopeful ongoing transformations in the context of Australia, mainly based on the paradigm of Transmodernity, as well as contemporary Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian writing. Ossana's analysis delves into African novels, intertwining historical and metaphysical tensions that challenge Western historical narratives.

241

Section II.IV, *Environmental crises and biopolitics*, is dedicated specifically to this pressing and urgent topic. Markku Lehtimäki (Chapter 34) reflects on the relevance of emerging forms that echo real (digital) communication as it is today, for instance, texts that simulate emails or social media feeds. Other crucial issues like biopolitics, gestational surrogacy and obstetric violence are dealt with by Antonia Navarro Tejero in Chapter 35. Through the analysis of literary depictions of these questions, the essay foregrounds how the intersecting forces of colonialism, capitalism, caste and patriarchy have shaped, and continue to shape, the experiences of marginalised women. Gender issues are also the focal point of Keitaro Morita (Chapter 36), whose case study analysis through the perspective of transecology offers a timely contribution to this emerging field. By linking environmental crises with the systemic marginalisation of trans bodies, this chapter effectively challenges heteronormative and cisgendered assumptions that keep shaping ecological narratives in the Anthropocene.

Finally, section II.V, *Technological crises and posthumanism*, winds up the second and final part of the volume, exploring the entanglements between humanity, technology and crisis. Amy Chan Kit-Sze (Chapter 37) interestingly connects posthumanity with Chinese mythology. The reflection of the contrasting views and understandings between China and the West regarding technology is particularly insightful, as it reinforces the argument that no single cultural or ideological perspective should dominate global discourse. Ivan Callus (Chapter 38) focuses on

speculative fiction, vulnerability and dystopia through the trope of the last man. He contends that the case study can be considered a foundational work that reshapes posthuman thought, and ultimately, literary understandings of crisis. Dystopian reflections are also the focus of Sidia Fiorato (Chapter 39), who connects the events in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to the current suppression of writing (and thought) caused by AI, mainly the generative technology ChatGPT. Daniela Carpi (Chapter 40) also addresses advanced technology and its infinite possibilities through varied forms, contending that literature facilitates our understanding and acceptance of the inevitable transition towards posthumanity. Lastly, AI concerns are also addressed in the last two chapters. Paula Carbone (Chapter 41) describes an actual experiment conducted at university level to explore the use of ChatGPT to work with literature and narrative texts. Additionally, Anders Hedman (Chapter 42) concentrates on certain reactions to AI that advocate for its deceleration and reconsideration through a "Pause Letter". Through a rhetorical analysis of the arguments posed in these reactions, the essay elucidates misconceptions and fallacies, reiterating the need to approach and use AI critically and responsibly.

242

In conclusion, *The Routledge Companion on Literatures and Crisis* sheds light on the multifarious connections between literature and crisis. Presenting a thorough theoretical framework and a wide variety of case studies, it brings together a diverse range of perspectives on the literary representation of crisis that contribute to ongoing debates about the relationship between literature and crisis, such as that of Lauren Berlant. More specifically, Berlant examines the way intimate tensions shape social existence, what is referred to as "the ordinary biopower" (2022: 19), highlighting how literature represents the complexities of living together amidst inconvenience and ambivalence. As for the relevance of this companion, one of its strengths lies in the nature of the text: it provides a comprehensive overview of the field of literature and crisis, mapping key debates, methodologies and future directions and consolidating heterogeneous strands of research into an accessible and coherent framework. Another notable strength of the volume is the exploration of both large- and small-scale crises from a wide transcultural perspective, using several methodologies and literary forms. In fact, another key contribution is the inclusion of multiple forms of literature, including innovative forms such as digital media texts. Even if the focus on these emerging narratives is not very extensive, it still allows for a thorough analysis of the way literature shapes and is shaped by crisis, also setting ground for further research. Moreover, while the volume addresses literature and crisis across a wide temporal scope, future works could narrow their focus to specific historical periods, which would allow for a deeper analysis of the topic. Lastly, another relevant insight of the volume is its focus on hopeful views when facing moments of crisis. This envisioning of possible ways out

of crisis becomes essential in our current context, as hope is what links and reconciles humanity (Han 2024: 29). Collectively, the volume constitutes a detailed and comprehensive reference that makes a highly relevant and original contribution to the academic investigation of crisis and its representation in different literatures. Thus, it will undoubtedly attract literary scholars in general, and those working on encompassing fields of study in particular, for instance, cultural and trauma studies, postcolonialism, ecocriticism and ecofeminism, among others.

Acknowledgements

Research for this review was funded by MICIU/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 and by the European Regional Development Fund (FEDER, EU) (code PID2021-124841NB-I00), together with the Government of Aragón and the European Social Fund (ESF) (code H03_23R).

Works Cited

243

BERLANT, Lauren. 2022. *On the Inconvenience of Other People*. Duke U.P.

BUTLER, Judith. 2012. "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation" *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26 (2): 134-151. <<https://doi.org/10.5325/jspecphil.26.2.0134>>

HAN, Byung-Chul. 2024. *El espíritu de la esperanza*. Trans. A. Ciria. Herder Editorial.

Received: 26/05/2025

Accepted: 06/10/2025



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.