Monica byrne:

**Author Monica Byrne Opens 2018 Hall Science Fiction Lecture Series**

COLLEGE STATION (January 23, 2018) – Cushing Memorial Library & Archives’ Halbert W. Hall Speakers Series on Science Fiction and Fantasy will kick off the year with a talk from lecturer, playwright, essayist, and noted science fiction author Monica Byrne. Ms. Byrne’s talk is titled **“Instructions for the Age of Emergency”** and will be presented in Rudder Theater on February 2 from 5:30 pm**-**7:00 pm.

“We are very excited to have Monica here for our opening 2018 Hall Lecture,” noted Jeremy Brett, Texas A&M University Libraries’ Curator of Science Fiction and Fantasy. “Monica’s scientific roots provide her with a natural connection to Texas A&M. Monica is a deeply thoughtful person, who writes with wisdom, passion, and grace about both our present and our future. She is one of the great storytellers currently working in the genre.”

Monica Byrne is best known for her 2012 dramatic production “What Every Girl Should Know,” which has been performed in multiple cities across the country, and for her 2014 debut novel The Girl in the Road which won the 2015 James Tiptree, Jr. Award and was nominated for the 2014 UK Kitschies ‘Golden Tentacle’ Award for best debut novel of speculative fiction. Copies of Ms. Byrne’s book will be available for sale and she will sign as requested.

Ms. Byrnes’ lecture is sponsored by the University Libraries, The Melbern G. Glasscock Center for Humanities Research and its Science Fiction Studies Working Group, the Department of English, the Department of International Studies, and the Department of Visualization.

<http://www.thebatt.com/science-technology/author-monica-byrne-speaks-at-cushing-library-science-fiction-series/article_79eb5d7a-0a1a-11e8-b165-938ac3ae8358.html>

<https://monicacatherine.com/2018/02/08/instructions-for-the-age-of-emergency/>

full text of her speech

Thank you so much to Texas A&M for hosting me, and especially to the Science Fiction Archivist, Jeremy Brett, who invited me and orchestrated everything. He’s been a supporter of my work for years, and I’m so delighted to finally meet him, and to have the chance to address all of you. I’d also like to thank TAMU Libraries, the Glasscock Center for Humanities Research and its Science Fiction Studies Working Group, the Department of English, the Department of International Studies, and the Department of Visualization. I’m so honored by such an intersectional effort to bring me here. So thank you.

As Jeremy said, I write a lot of things, but when people ask me what I am, the first thing I say is that I’m a science fiction writer. I gave Jeremy a name for this talk before I wrote any of it, because I was still finishing my next novel. It’s called *The Actual Star.*It’s taken me six years to write. My agent is reading it as we speak. It jumps back and forth from the distant past, during the collapse of ancient Maya civilization; to the present, specifically the year 2012; to the far future, when a new global religion has brought lasting peace to humankind. So I spent a lot of the past year in the year 3012, in my head, imagining what the world will look like a thousand years from now. I want to talk to you about it because, like all science fiction, even though it’s set in the future, it’s a response to our present moment. My talk is called “Instructions for the Age of Emergency,” which is the time period we’re living in right now. In the far future, there are entire fields of study devoted to it, and to the people who lived in it, and what we must have been thinking.

During the last year, I locked myself out of social media for months at a time. I had to concentrate on work and, to be honest, protect my mental health after the election. I only read *The Washington Post* on my phone in bed in the morning—I still do—and that was enough. Everything I read, I asked myself, “How did we get here? What are the root causes? How can things be different?” And then I would try to answer those questions in the day’s writing.

The possibility I wanted to explore is that things didn’t start going astray after 9/11, or because of Nixon, or with the Industrial Revolution, or even with the invention of race that enabled the Native American genocide and the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. I wanted to explore the possibility that humanity lost its way in the Neolithic Era. We regard the Neolithic as the beginning of history, and if we mean written history, maybe. But humans lived for two hundred thousand years before that—before the fall of Troy, before permanent settlements, before the invention of surplus and property and money and agriculture. All of that is only about twelve thousand years old, or, 6% of our history. The fact that we don’t have newspapers from the other 94% of our history doesn’t mean it didn’t happen. It also doesn’t make it any less important when thinking about the range of human possibility, and the range of possible human futures.

Much of science fiction deals with imagining dystopia. I’ll talk about why that is later, but I strongly believe that, at this moment in time, we need to remember that one of the highest callings of science fiction is imagining utopia. I don’t mean starry-eyed visions of a fairyland that drops out of the sky. I also don’t mean a static society built on some fundamental irony like panopticon or the suppression of free will. I mean honest, earnest engagement with the question of what a better world looks like.

In the *Earthseed*trilogy, Octavia Butler’s characters go through hell in their struggle to establish a utopian community. In the *Mars*trilogy, Kim Stanley Robinson’s characters go through several revolutions and constitutions in building a better world than the one they came from (Earth). Ursula K. Le Guin—who died while I was composing this talk—is the leader of us all in this regard. Her work engages the idea of realistic utopia over and over again—through Hain, Anarres, Gethen, Earthsea, and of course, Omelas.

My novel *The Actual Star*is an attempt to work in that same tradition. The distant past—the collapse of Maya civilization—takes place amid the failure of monarchy. The present—our age, the “Age of Emergency”—takes place amid the failure of capitalism. So, what does the year 3012 look like? I’ll first describe it, and then describe how I got there, extrapolating from this moment in time.

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In 3012, the world operates by the twin philosophy of accumulation and dispersion. Put as simply as possible, The Law of Accumulation states that accumulation of any human property ultimately leads to human suffering. For example, accumulation of capital leads to inequality. Accumulation of family ties leads to feuds. Accumulation of feuds leads to war. Accumulation of population leads to disease. Accumulation of territory and power leads to war. Not necessarily at first, or even for centuries—but eventually, always.

The antidote is the Law of Dispersion. Put as simply as possible, it states that lasting peace can only result from the constant temporal and spatial dispersion of all human properties. In other words, we build a society that flows with, not against, the entropic nature of the universe.

In 3012, there are no borders. There are no nations. There are no families, aside from the human family. We call every other person “carnala,” a Mexican Spanish term meaning “a blood relation.” The average life expectancy is 130 years. The world population is steady at one billion. We roam the earth as permanent nomads, and, by common agreement, only own as much as we can carry—this is why the system is called Laviaja, a feminized form of “El Viaje,” Spanish for “the journey.” Those of us who cannot move or walk are accommodated so radically by mutual aid, artificial intelligence, and augmented reality that the very concept of disability no longer exists. In fact, many of us *choose*to have what we think of as disabilities, and call them “gifts,” because they are ways of creating community.

We eat primarily by foraging, a practice now aided by advanced artificial intelligence and augmented reality. No one eats animals, since we began learning their languages. Where there isn’t much to be foraged, our photosynthetic skin takes over. When we want home-cooked food, we go to a wayhouse. Wayhouses are places where we can rest for up to a period of nine days, in exchange for a few hours of work a day. We gather for two daily meals plus, in many areas of the world, teatime. Agribots—farming robots—do the majority of farming and gardening, strictly on a subsistence basis, near wayhouses. In other words, no one goes hungry. Food security is simply not an issue. This is because, at a certain point, around the 23rd century, all technology was built to serve humankind, not profit.

None of us stay in the same place for more than nine days. None of us even stay with the same people for more than nine days. But whomever we lose, we regain. With whomever we meet on the road, we fall into any number of familiar roles—sister and sister, lover and lover, mother and child, aunt and niece, elder and youth—and one of the greatest joys of life is that dance of discovery, of what each new person is to the other. If we give birth, we gladly give up our baby within nine days; assured that our child will come back to us again and again in the form of other children, throughout our lives.

There is no space travel, since space programs were dependent on capitalism. There are aliens, but they’re so far away that we have to wait a few hundred years every time we want to say anything, so it doesn’t affect our lives very much. There are no weapons; the very idea is strange. Crime is very rare; when it does happen, in the worst cases, the crime is made public and the perpetrator is marked for others to see and avoid if they wish, but the criminal is still allowed free movement in the world. Their exile is social.

There’s no currency or system of money; there’s a worldwide, perpetual gift exchange. Objects have no value beyond their practical use; a plastic bowl is as good as a porcelain bowl. There’s no manufacturing because there’s no need for material goods. Everything is used on a recycled basis.

There are approximately fifteen hundred genders. Anyone who wants to bear a child can do so. No pregnancy is unplanned. There’s no correlation between genitalia and gender. Some of the genders are in fact the descendants of nationalist and ethnic identities, as there have long ceased to be nations or ethnic groups in any meaningful way, given the Law of Dispersion. Identity is completely voluntary and mutable.

The system of government, such as it is, is a worldwide sortition democracy, which is actually a very old form of democracy. A legislature is randomly selected from a pool of all available citizens, from the age of seven years old. This legislature is in session twenty-four hours a day, its members refreshed every hour, on the hour, mostly just to re-ratify a basic Bill of Rights, but also to take up whatever special questions apply on the global scale. As a citizen, you’re called to serve for about one hour every year or two. For local matters, moving clusters of people are governed by algorithms called “umbrellas” that take into account each person’s needs and preferences. An umbrella may govern a single wayhouse, or an area of a hundred square kilometers, depending on the number of people present, which is always changing.

A person can opt out of this system. They aren’t punished. They aren’t banned. They’re never refused food or shelter, care or companionship, wherever they go. The highest law is the rule of the road, which is radical hospitality. As the saying goes, *The strangest stranger is your sister*.

I’ve described this future to a few friends. About half think it’s a utopia and half think it’s a dystopia. A lot of people can’t imagine not having a permanent home or a set family. I understand that. I love my apartment in Durham. I strongly identify with my family. I love eating meat. I’m a creature of my century. At the same time, I want to explore the possibility that what we take for granted as the foundations of society are not only no more natural than any other state of being, but the ultimate roots of violence in the world. I wanted to see what happened if I pulled up those roots. And this thought experiment proceeded directly from in our current moment in history.

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So how did I derive this version of the future from today?

To answer that, I need to name a very important book. Rebecca Solnit is probably most famous for *Hope in the Dark*and *Men Explain Things to Me.*But the book that felt most relevant to my research was *A Paradise Built in Hell,*published in 2009. The thesis of the book is that utopian communities of radical mutual aid arise spontaneously in the wake of natural disasters. Again and again, drawing from five case studies and decades of disaster research, Solnit describes spontaneous gathering, joyful presence, a profound euphoria among survivors, and a longing to return to that state.

But oftentimes—and increasingly so, in the modern era—those utopian communities are criminalized and destroyed by forces of so-called “civilization,” especially the state and wealthy elites. This was nowhere more apparent than in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, where flood victims seeking help were murdered and penned up because of the lies spread by the media, military, and state. Another example is the brief window of time after 9/11. The world was stunned by how New Yorkers united in radical mutual aid, love, compassion for total strangers—a state of being shattered by the return to “business as usual,” which in that case, meant waging a war that made no sense, and made the world a far worse place.

To paraphrase Solnit, we have it all backwards: the society we *currently live in*is the catastrophe, and going through a natural disaster gives us the opportunity to wake up from the spell. She argues that these spontaneous utopias are just as natural and native to us as any other way of living, if not more so; and in fact, one we’ve practiced as a species before. Her challenge is: how do we codify those spontaneous utopias into a daily, workable system of government?

My answer is the future world I just described to you.

It’s a world shaped by climate refugees—constantly wandering, practicing radical hospitality, making communities of mutual aid that form and collapse and form again.

And here’s why this specific version of the future matters: we are about to enter a unprecedented period of global natural disasters. In fact, we’re already in it. In the next thirty years, researchers estimate that up to 300 million people worldwide will be displaced because of climate change. As a comparison, the Syrian Civil War “only” displaced 13 million, “only” five million of whom actually left the country. So five million was enough to swing elections to the far right, see the rise of xenophobia, make Great Britain leave the European Union, break whole infrastructures that we took for granted, and has killed thousands of refugees. So now imagine those effects, multiplied by sixty, in the next thirty years.

This is why I predict that the next millennium will be shaped by climate refugees.

In September I attended a conference organized by a think tank based in Brussels. I remember a workshop on the refugee crisis in Europe. A Member of Parliament from a Scandinavian country confessed that she was exasperated by the dominant opinion in the room, namely, that European nations should accommodate the influx of refugees. She said, How do I explain this to my constituents who are about to retire, that the money for the pensions they’ve been expecting their whole lives is being depleted, because it’s going toward social services for people who are just arriving?

Well, the answer is very hard: those pensions existed in the first place because of the ongoing exploitation of the very countries those refugees are fleeing. The Centre for Applied Research published a study last year that estimated the amount of wealth flowing from so-called developing countries to so-called developed countries is twice that of the flow in the opposite direction. To quote anthropologist Jason Hickel, “What this means is that the usual development narrative has it backwards. Aid is effectively flowing in reverse. Rich countries aren’t developing poor countries; poor countries are developing rich ones.” In other words, our way of life in the United States depends directly on the impoverishment and terrorization of the rest of the world.

But no one can get elected by saying that. No one can get elected by saying the least of it. In my opinion, Hillary Clinton tried. She tried telling the white working class that their manufacturing jobs were simply not coming back, that the winds of the world were blowing in such a way that there was no way to make them come back, but that she had a plan to train them for the new jobs that *did*and *would*exist. Instead, as we all know, the white working class overwhelmingly voted for a man who promised to resurrect jobs that no longer exist, and in truth, never had the knowledge, intention, or desire to do so.

The wave of climate refugees is not the only wave that’s about to hit us. Global inequality has tripled since 1960. Oxfam recently reported that eight men hold more wealth than the lowest four billion combined. The McKinsey Global Institute estimated that by 2030—only twelve years from now—40% of all jobs will be automated. Given any one of these factors, it’s pretty clear to me that the systems in place are about to fall. In our lifetimes. That’s a given.

In my mind, that’s not a bad thing.

Here’s why: because it will give us that break, that window, into a radically other form of living. I try to think of wealthy Western nations really holding back 300 million refugees at their borders and the idea is laughable. Especially when millions of those refugees will be internally displaced, will be you and me. I try to think of police trying to keep people from occupying the thousands of empty apartments in our cities that are just parked there, as investments for the wealthy, and never inhabited. There will be too many of us. And maybe finally, we will realize, as a species, that borders don’t make sense anymore. That nation states don’t make sense anymore. That capitalism doesn’t make sense anymore. That not having a universal basic income doesn’t make sense anymore. To quote Le Guin again: “We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable—but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings.”

And—I will add—the earth acts on human beings. Climate change isn’t just the invisible hand driving us now; it has been, throughout all of history. The Agricultural Revolution was probably the result of climate change. The Levant and Nile Valley were probably settled because of climate change. Ancient Maya civilization rose and fell because of climate change. And now capitalism and the nation state may well fall because of climate change.

I find hope in that. I’m even thrilled by it. I believe we currently live in an age of spectacular barbarism, but that circumstances are colluding to give us a way out. Nowhere is it written that capitalism is natural, that poverty is natural, that war is natural, that patriarchy is natural, that monogamy is natural, that individualism is natural, or that the two-parent two-child family is natural. We made all that up. Hedge funds, corporations, institutions, oligarchies, profit, brands, nation states, borders—we made all that up, too. At the most fundamental level, they are fictions. We can make new fictions in their place.

And we must be very, very careful which fictions to choose.

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Now I’m going to come back to the idea of dystopia. A lot of popular science fiction is set in post-apocalyptic landscapes, to the extent that a lot of people conflate science fiction with post-apocalyptic stories or with dystopia, as if the only futures available to us are dark. Think of *Mad Max*or Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road.*I do think *Mad Max: Fury Road*is one of the greatest films of all time. But I just never bought that vision of the future. I never believed it. *Mad Max*is a fun fantasy and *The Road*is bleakness porn, and that’s fine, but as for describing a plausible human future, I don’t think they do, and I don’t think they’re meant to. Nevertheless, they have an incredibly strong influence on popular imagination. As Solnit writes, “Disaster movies and the media continue to portray ordinary people as hysterical or vicious in the face of calamity…but the prevalent human nature in disaster is resilient, resourceful, generous, empathic, and brave.” As goes popular imagination, so goes belief, and so goes behavior. Which fictions we choose to elevate matters.

I want to draw especial attention to the treatment of AI—artificial intelligence—in these narratives. Think of *Ex Machina*or *Blade Runner.* I spoke at TED two years in a row, and one year, there were back-to-back talks about whether or not AI was going to evolve out of control and “kill us all.” I realized that that scenario is just something I have never been afraid of. And at the same moment, I noticed that the people who are terrified of machine super-intelligence are almost exclusively white men. I don’t think anxiety about AI is really about AI at all. I think it’s certain white men’s displaced anxiety upon realizing that women and people of color have, and have always had, sentience, and are beginning to act on it on scales that they’re unprepared for. There’s a reason that AI is almost exclusively gendered as female, in fiction and in life. There’s a reason they’re almost exclusively in service positions, in fiction and in life. I’m not worried about how we’re going to treat AI some distant day, I’m worried about how we treat other humans, now, today, all over the world, far worse than anything that’s depicted in AI movies. It matters that still, the vast majority of science fiction narratives that appear in popular culture are imagined by, written by, directed by, and funded by white men who interpret the crumbling of *their*world as the crumbling of *the*world.

We don’t need more dystopian narratives. We already live in a dystopia. Dystopia is the lived reality of billions of people on earth, right now, including in the United States, and it didn’t start with Trump. Ask the people who wake up every day wondering whether this is the day they’ll be executed by the police. Or the people who are under surveillance because of their religion. Or the people who are taking refuge in churches so they aren’t deported back to the country they fled from, where they face torture and death. Or the people who stand on street corners with legs or arms missing, who supposedly fought for “national security” of “the greatest country on earth,” but came back to a system that fails to provide them with the most basic care. Or the hundreds of public servants who are being purged from the government at this moment. We in the U.S. are living through an authoritarian takeover right now. That’s not a conspiracy theory, it’s not conjecture, and it’s not hyperbole. It’s a textbook case.

Even if we manage to avoid an authoritarian future, even if Trump is impeached tomorrow, I don’t think we’re going to go back to normal. What is normal? I was born in 1981, so my understanding of ‘normal’ is small-town Pennsylvania in the nineties. Not much of world affairs ever touched my hometown, except our weekly copy of *Newsweek*that arrived on Tuesdays, with the latest headline on Kurt Cobain or Nancy Kerrigan. Because of that upbringing, I’ve always had an expectation of relative stability—that things were going to be the same from one year to the next. That there would always be such things as colleges, banks, hospitals, private land, armed police, publishing companies, coffee shops, or a judicial branch of government.

Now I’m not counting on any of it, even for the privileged. It’s a way of protecting myself, of staying light on my feet. I think those who don’t expect a return to normalcy will be the best positioned to harness the moment for good, to create and choose new stories that will guide us into the future. Stories where technology serves humankind and not profit. Stories unlike the ones we have in *The Road*or *Ex Machina,* where we aren’t terrified of each other, aren’t suspicious of each other, don’t enslave each other for profit and pleasure. Stories that reflect the lived reality of disaster research: that humankind is fundamentally kind. We live in a dystopia *now*. But the Age of Emergency is our best chance to change it.

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So here are my instructions for the Age of Emergency.

1. **Ask yourself what you really need.**

Can you move? Do you have food? Do you have shelter? Are you warm enough? Do you have company, of family or friends? Do you have the medicines you need to stay alive? Do you have a voice? Do you have a will? Do you have time?

There may soon come a time when our definitions of what we need will change radically; but if we have them, we’ll have enough. The less you need, the more free you’ll be, and the more you’ll be able to change when the time comes.

1. **Ask yourself what you really believe, and why you believe it.**

Rebecca Solnit writes: “Any belief that is acted on makes the world in its image.” I would extend that to say: stories are a type of belief. This is why I said we must be very careful when we choose which fictions to elevate in popular culture.

It matters. Because when disaster strikes, will I stay inside to bar the door and make sure no one takes my stuff or eats me, like in *The Road*? Or will I check on my neighbors to make sure they’re okay, like in *Parable of the Sower*? I think I’ll do the latter, but I won’t really know until the time comes. I won’t know which stories I’ve really chosen to believe and act on. We have a choice of whether to create and consume positive visions of the future. It worries me that I don’t see many of them right now. Demand them, find them, recommend them, embody them.

1. **Follow artists.**

We don’t often think of artists as leaders. In fact, we don’t often think of artists as people, but as leprechauns who live beyond daily needs like groceries and toilet paper. I can attest that that’s not the case. We live in a culture saturated with art, everywhere we turn, online and offline, every minute of every day, and it profoundly influences our lives. But we’ve been so trained to devalue it—to expect it to come to us for free—that we are in serious danger of losing the voices we need most, at the time we need them most.

To quote activist Adrienne Maree-Brown, “All organizing is science fiction. When we talk about a world without prisons; a world without police violence; a world where everyone has food, clothing, shelter, quality education; a world free of white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, heterosexism; we are talking about a world that doesn’t currently exist. But collectively dreaming up one that does means we can begin building it into existence.”

The ones who do that dreaming in the first place? Are usually artists.

In other words, artists are absolutely leaders, in a way that no one else can be. Politicians have to worry about saying the thing that will get them elected. CEOs have to worry about saying the thing that will increase their profit shares. That’s fine—that’s their job. An artist’s job is just to tell the truth, or come as close to it as she can. And that’s why, to quote Le Guin again, “Resistance and change often *begin* in art.”

And when I say art, I don’t mean abstract paintings hanging in well-lit galleries. That’s just the 1% of the art world. Not surprisingly, it’s a world of wealthy white elites. Meanwhile, people of every color, of every age, in every country, in every socioeconomic class, make art. Subway dance is art. Church choirs are art. YouTube makeup tutorials are art. Memes are art. Fashion is art. *Game of Thrones* reaction videos are art. Graffiti is art. Vine videos were art, back when Vine existed—a platform brilliantly realized by brown and black teenagers, until it fell prey to corporate profit motives. We swim in art, the vast majority of it produced by those who are underpaid or not paid at all, who aren’t “seen” by the existing system of financial compensation. We have to be the ones who see them, instead. Find the artists in your life. Find a way to pay them for their work. Then follow them: they’re telling the truth.

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Last fall, I went to Mexico for two months to learn Spanish. After finishing school in Oaxaca, I went to the coast. I chose a beach where the waves looked the right size and went out with my boogie board. The same thing happened over and over: I’d see a perfect wave curling right toward me, and I’d be in the perfect position to catch it, but as it got close, I saw it was way too big, so with my body half-turned, I’d hesitate and then try to dive into it, and it was too late and I’d wipe out. That happened three times (and I got sand in my sinuses) before I realized these waves were just too big.

I’ve thought about that situation many times since. About the moment of hesitation right before the wave comes down, when you know you’re screwed. When I think about the next fifty years, I have that same feeling: the wave is just too big.

But when talking about the near future, I don’t think it’s useful to say “we’re all doomed” or “the world’s going to end.” It’s a lazy way to disengage. There are eight billion of us. At least some are going to survive even the worst, including a nuclear war, a supervirus, or a methane hydrate burst. When people say “we’re all doomed,” what they really mean is that the status quo is doomed, and that’s potentially an excellent thing. We as a species don’t have the option of leaving this moment in time. Paradoxically, I find tremendous freedom in that. It’s not a matter of whether everything’s about to change. It’s a matter of which story of the future we choose now, so that we’ll be ready when the wave hits.