



## Narrating Catastrophic ‘Cosmology Episodes’: An Analytical Reading of Graham Elder's *A Covid Odyssey: A Fictional COVID-19 Pandemic Story*

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### Abstract:

This study aims at exploring how narrative creativity deals with the current catastrophic crisis of COVID-19 through a critical examination of Graham Elder's *A Covid Odyssey: A Fictional COVID-19 Pandemic Story* (2020). It investigates the text in light of Seeger and Sellnow's theorization on narratives of crisis and Karl E. Weick's deliberations on "cosmology episode." Elder's text narrativizes the pandemic as a disruptive event that precipitates a global sense of claustrophobia and uncertainty, and profoundly destabilizes the orderly cosmos of normal life dynamics and routines. *A Covid Odyssey* contextualizes the chaos and disarray and constructs meaningful structures for a sundry of conflicting accounts and irrational interpretations that involve denial of risks, potential harm and post-crisis impact. The narrative elicits deeper insights into and rational outlook of the experience and it reshapes perceptions turning the attention to the role that the individual plays in the cosmos as an inclusive habitat that relies for its survival on collective solidarity of intelligible critical worldviews. The study of the narrative reveals the extent to which empathetic effect mitigates discomfort and arms the emotionally, physically and economically suffering with a possibility of stability, a sense of control over the chaotic situation and a hope in surviving the ‘cosmology episode’.

### Keywords:

'cosmology episode,' management, pandemic narrative, crisis, COVID-19, disruption, orderly cosmology, conflicting, sensemaking, collectivity

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## Introduction

Throughout history, onslaughts of pandemic crises have precipitated a global sense of phobia that has profoundly reshaped human culture, perceptions, and ethics on all levels: individually, collectively, organizationally, economically, politically, socially, psychologically and more significantly physically. COVID-19 of the twenty-first century is a test for this contention. It has radically and rapidly disrupted normative daily routine and order of life, and unsettled the individual's taken-for-granted assumptions and expectations. In such chaos, the individual experiences a sense of loss of time and place in the universe. Susan Sontag describes this state of being as "the end of bravado, the end of folly, the end of trusting life, the end of taking life for granted." Unprecedented drastic measures have been adopted to control the tremendous impact, the proliferation and the transmission of the virus, and reduce mortality rates. Most prominent of them all is the strict enforcement of a compulsory lockdown on all aspects of human life and activities.

Policies of lockdown, curfew and isolation speak wisdom to COVID-19. However, they are the greatest misery that has overturned human lives confining bodies physically and spatially as well as psychologically and emotionally. It is noteworthy that John Donne's *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1624) is redolent with reflections that have bearing on this condition. From the perspective of a patient, Donne illustrates that certain policies are outcomes of what he calls "emergent occasions." He explains that health is a long regular work; "we deliberate upon our *meats*, and *drink* ... and *exercises*, and we hew, and we polish every stone, that goes to that building" (253). Yet in an instant, a "Canon batters all, overthrows all, demolishes all" (3) and one feels helpless and vulnerable.

Karl Weick, the management theorist, develops the concept "cosmology episode" to describe those unexpected "emergent occasions" that warp the orderly cosmologies of life. The concept underscores the conditions and periods in which "people suddenly and deeply feel that the universe is no longer a rational, orderly system" (Weick, "Collapse," 633); they are overwhelmed with the disturbing thought that "I've never been here before, I have no idea where I am, and I have no idea who can help me" (Weick "Collapse," 633-634). In the opinion of Weick, the coincidental collapse of the "sense of what is occurring and the means to rebuild it" (633) produces the forcefully shattering impact of 'cosmology episodes.' Within the spectrum of 'cosmology episodes', there is disorientation, distraction, inability of seeing into the essence of things and a profound loss of sense-making of what is going on; all of which instigate skepticism about the role of humans in the cosmos. With the onset of this disruptive state, there are various deliberations on the consequences as well as reflections on whether human beings would be able to respond to and/or survive the catastrophe.

In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic has induced an intractable and daunting epistemological crisis in terms of the "four aspects of knowledge—description, explanation, prediction, and control" (20) as Francis A. Beer and Robert Hariman observe. Humans feel vulnerable to inaccurate epistemes and misleading accounts that prevail the globe in ways that disable modes of perceptions and limit the ability to respond adequately to the eerie ongoing crisis, the things to come, and the potentiality of controlling unmanageable conditions. Such a chaotic state generates a communication vacuum and informational void which begin to be filled by official media channels, "watchdog groups, and members of the community " (Seeger and Sellnow I).

Significantly, the emergence of numerous narratives tackling the crisis of the pandemic display an "instrumental capacity to fill the [discursive space and] absence of meaning"(Seeger and Sellnow 8). They contextualize the chaos and disarray and attempt to construct meaningful structures for diverse conflicting accounts and irrational interpretations that involve denial of risks, potential harm and post-crisis impact. Through addressing and reflecting the readers' uncertainties, narratives have been of great avail as they ponder on "what happens, why it happens, who makes it happen, when it happens, and how people should respond to these events" (Robert Heath 171). As such, they elicit deeper insights and rational outlook that support those experiencing the crisis and the public at large and orient towards a constructive intervention. Often, narrative has an empathetic effect that soothes the discomfort and arms the emotionally, physically and economically suffering with a possibility of stability, a sense of control over the eerie situation, stamina to endure the disruption of 'cosmology episodes' and hope to restore meaning and order.

This study presents a critical examination of Graham Elder's *A Covid Odyssey: A fictional COVID-19 Pandemic Story* in light of Seeger and Sellnow's theorization of narratives of crisis and Karl E. Weick's deliberations on 'cosmology episode.' Conceptualization of the catastrophic onset of disruptive event provides critical reflections that probe into the politics of the current eerie moment. *A Covid Odyssey* comprises diverse episodes narrated from the medical autodiegetic perspective of its protagonist Mark Spencer. Mark Davis and Davina Lohm identify episodic accounts as one of the specificities of "narratives on pandemic experience" (8). In Elder's text, the episodes are thematically linked by the COVID-19 pandemic that occupies center stage and constitutes the backdrop. The predicament informs the underlying structure of the narrative. Masks stand out as a prominent element in the plot both physically and figuratively. In order to abide by the protective measures, characters don masks. Figuratively, the facts of life as displayed in the narrative are masked by ambiguity, uncertainty and equivocation. 'Odyssey' in the title is highly functional as an archetype. It suggests the wandering,

the quest and peregrination in which human beings are immersed as they confront the muddle associated with COVID-19, and it foreshadows the trips and travels undertaken by the protagonist of Elder's text. There is an added significance of the mention of 'odyssey' in its reference to the Homeric Odyssey of Odysseus. In fact, connotations of the 'odyssey' in all contexts are evocative of hope and resilience in the endeavor to overcome disproportional odds.

In *A Covid Odyssey*, Spencer, the narrator-protagonist ER doctor traverses the stormy pandemic landscape of America. His hometown in Northern Ontario, still unaffected by COVID-19, was in the process of preparation for the potential onslaught of the virus, and eventually imposes full lockdown and "social distancing measures in place" (12). Despite the unprecedented conditions brought about by the pandemic, Spencer's wife, Sarah, travels to attend a conference in Florida. As a result, she is hospitalized suspected of contracting the fatal disease. The local hospital in which she is admitted is hardly equipped with the adequate medical supplies and resources to treat COVID-19 patients. Spencer, alarmed at the news, undertakes a 2000 kms trip, in a race against time, across territories ravaged by the pandemic to save his dying wife with a trial drug called Camodesivir.

Throughout the voyage, Spencer documents in detail the destructive impact of COVID-19, the catastrophic 'cosmology episode' as Weick depicts it; the collapse of the orderly way of life; what Seeger, Sellnow and Ulmer describe as orderly life that includes "routines, relationships, norms, and belief" (4).<sup>1</sup> As eye-witness, Spencer records the changes that seem to him to be irrevocable as manifested in people's lack of reliability and sense-making. In his encounter with a group of people, he is overcome by disorientation with their eccentric behavior and ridiculous views towards the imminent threat of COVID-19 that defy logical thinking and negate the ethics of his scientific norms.

### **COVID-19: A Collapse of Orderly Cosmology**

In orderly circumstances, "events cohere in time and space" and "change unfolds in an orderly manner" (Weick "Collapse" 633). The stupefaction that overpowers people with the COVID-19 crisis affects life in its dimensions of time and space and people experience disorganization of linearity. In *A Covid Odyssey*, the non-linear dynamic is reflected in the narrative construction. A constant temporal shifting is embodied in the headings of the chapters namely; 'Present Day: Saturday, March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2020', 'Four Days Earlier: Tuesday, March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020', 'Two Days Earlier: Thursday, March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020', 'Yesterday, Friday, March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020'. This is followed by an abrupt digression that takes the reader back to the opening chapter entitled 'Present Day, Saturday, March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2020, Continued'. With the retrospective movement of the narrative process, the narrator reminisces on the past orderly universe. The juxtaposition with the present crisis of Weick's 'cosmology episode' is the narrator's way

to acquire some strength. An increasing attention to timeframe and a monitoring of the slow movement is explained by Ruth Ogden, in "A Year of Blursdays: How Coronavirus Distorted Our Sense of Time in 2020," as "simply because we are more aware of time than normal". The disjointed non-linearity and disrupted trajectory of the chapters and the events are suggestive of the unpredictability and the collapse of order instigated by the outbreak of COVID-19.

On another level, the narrative probes how the contemporary crisis of COVID-19 imposes exclusionary constraints that disrupt the spatial dynamics. Age Poom, Olle J arv, Matthew Zook, and Tuuli Toivonen describe the intense spatial response to the pandemic as "the biggest disruption to individual mobilities in modern times" (1-2). All immediate mitigation measures and the political and societal repercussions, "Hot spots, quarantine, closed borders, video-conferencing, and social distancing are all profoundly about distance, separation, and space" (1); they have taken place across geography. Such measures, Davis and Lohm note, maintain a "disruption of the connections and flows that secure political, economic, and social life" (74); they entail "a reconceptualization of the relationship between the individual, collectivity, public space and political power" (14) as Villar-Arg ai and L ope argue.

Significantly, the imposed constraints induce not only self-isolation but also surveillance of body politics of mobilities of both the individual and the population. Michel Foucault identifies such mechanisms and overall measures as "biopower" and/ or "biopolitics" through which power is imposed on bios or life. It is the "explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations" as a whole (140). In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault debates that biopower takes two forms: an anatomo-politics of the human body and a bio-politics of the population. The former centers on the body as a machine; "its disciplining ... its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls" (139). The latter focuses on the species body "imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity" (139). Foucault explains that "Their supervision was effected through an entire series of interventions and *regulatory controls: a bio-politics of the population*" (139). The target of the former form of biopower is the individual body whereas the latter form targets the species body. However, both forms of power are intertwined because individual bodies make up populations which in turn are made up of individual bodies. Moreover, both forms are oriented around understanding how the state and social mechanisms of power tend to guarantee health and productivity; "ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order" (138) in an endeavor to regain orderly cosmology.

In Elder's text, the Foucauldian "*regulatory controls*" is manifested in the very opening of the narrative indicating the closing at midnight of the US borders. Spencer feels miserable and confused because the decision could potentially impede his wife's flight home to Canada. In fact, the outbreak of COVID-19 disrupts not only the schedule of the flight but also Spencer's ethics as a doctor as he asks his wife, who has all the signs that she contracted the virus, to hide symptoms of the infection by taking "a gallon of cough syrup and a ton of acetaminophen, suck it up and get on board" (9). However, he reverts as he needed to re-establish his identity as a doctor, so he tells his wife, though in utmost distress and helplessness: "No, Sarah. You can't go on a plane until you're better. You have to go to the nearest hospital and get tested and treated" (9). He acts responsibly and explains that the transmission of the virus is like the "sprinkler system throughout the plane. Sending it onward to every conceivable destination" (9). Asking Spencer to drive and get her, Sarah provides him with a solution to the quandary. He is enthused to undertake the 'odyssey' through the American perilous landscape. Throughout the trip, Spencer turns into an eye-witness tracing the drastic disruption of spatial dynamics including borders, roads, public places, restaurants and hospitals.

In response to COVID-19, the US designates a new geographical paradigm. The pandemic changes the map and shifts actual borders beyond and into the edge of the territories. On the basis of this presumption, Ayelet Shachar in her analytical study of life in the times of COVID-19, muses that the US utilizes its power and sovereignty tools to engender a "whole new legal cartography of control over borders" in an attempt to regulate mobilities and access. A revealing case in point is manifested in Spencer's passing over the Ste. Mary's River Canadian and American lock systems and approaching Michigan coast line. He describes how COVID-19 wipes out the specificity of the space of a series of retirement homes, transforming them into breeding grounds for COVID-19 and "death traps" (29). The current crisis reverberates Mary's words in Nevil Shute's narrative *On the Beach* (1957), "It's horrible ... Everything shut up, and dirty, and stinking. It's as if the end of the world had come already ... [or] It's pretty close" (264). Spencer passes down his passport to the customs officers to cross the border. In response, an officer, who was also wearing a mask, tells him, "Only essential travel is permitted across this border as of today, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic" (30). Commenting further on spatial restrictions, the officer explains,

Under 19 U.S.C. 1318(b)(1)(C) and (b)(2), travel through the land ports of entry and ferry terminals along the United States-Canada border shall be limited to .... Individuals travelling for medical purposes (e.g., to receive medical treatment in the United States. (31)

Because Spencer's travel is considered not essential, it becomes impossible for him to be granted an entry into the American territories. He has no single document to prove that his wife is seriously if not fatally ill. Clearly, it is a deadlock; he will never be able to convince the customs officers and persuade them to grant him entry on medical grounds. The reason is that they interpret the laws literally. In fact, the scene at the border is highly significant as it reflects sovereignty tools and measures taken in response to COVID-19: passing laws to forbid mobility, to mandate wearing gloves and masks, to keep social distancing. And, in order to enforce the law in case of rioting or behaving inappropriately, it becomes a duty to call policemen, national and security guards and sometimes the military. In his frustration, Spencer resorts to maneuvering around the restrictions and procedures. Thus, in order to save his wife, he has to be "a better liar" (33)

### **Heedful Interaction: Tactics to 'manage' the Pandemic Crisis**

The controversial aura around COVID-19 accentuates human indecisiveness and uncertainty about the measures to be taken to reduce levels of disaster and the exposure to danger. This is evident in the conflicting outlooks of the members of the community who are heedless and unenlightened about the nature and the perils of the pandemic crisis. In his 'odyssey', Spencer encounters diverse people in various settings voicing conflicting and inconsistent views. Several are unaware of the catastrophic 'cosmology episode' and their illogical attitudes defy and raise doubt about Spencer's scientific interpretations.

Amidst the chaos, Spencer's medical background comes to his aid providing support, assistance and rescue. He endeavors to "reconcile [himself] to the reality of shattered assumptive worlds" (Bray 303) and his scientific training. In such a maneuver, he mirrors Herbert Simon reflections in his autobiography *Models of My Life* in which he envisions order and "meaningful simplicity in the midst of disorderly complexity" (275). In this respect, Spencer utilizes Weick's construct of "improvisation and bricolage" as a tactic. It arms him with the ability to be flexible and open-minded in his confrontation with controversial multiple interpretations. It proved effective in normalizing and rationalizing unpredictable responses and events. He thus resolves to be "alert to monitor details, avoiding making assumptions until some discussion occurs" (Malloch and Porter-O'Grady 106). Furthermore, he tends to be reticent and impartial giving no clear-cut opinions in response to what he hears from other people. As such, he asserts the necessity of discussions, undertakes to edit circulating interpretations and keeps an open mind. In so doing, he creates intelligible collective perspectives of the COVID-19 crisis, negotiating "difficult existential and spiritual questions that permit the construction of a new and coherent life narrative" (Bray 303).

One of the revealing episodes is Spencer's encounter with male police officer in Michigan. Although officers and officials are entrusted with enforcing safety measures in times of pandemics, the officer is carelessly ungloved and unmasked. Moreover, he accosts Spencer when he approached with his truck without considering social distance. Ironically, despite his sheer violation of the imposed measures of precaution, he tells Spencer sternly, "We are in a state of emergency here in Michigan" (41) with a strong emphasis on Michigan; and adds that there should be "no joy riding without a solid reason" (42). In an absurd gesture, he asks him to take off the mask and stands less than two feet away. Yet, Spencer though hesitatingly retorts: "Social distancing please. Do you mind moving back six feet, officer?" (42). An argument ensues between the officer and Spencer and discloses the oppositional perspectives they embrace towards cautionary measures. From a medical perspective, Spencer contends that the literature is not clear at that point. Yet, until there are further findings, he finds wearing masks and gloves a rational initiative since "it was better to be overprotected than unprotected" (40). In accordance with the view of Morgan, Frost and Pondy in their study *Organizational Symbolism*, Spencer though uncertain which stance to embrace, attempts to make sense of what occurs through reading into the current situation (24).

As the narrative unfolds, more episodes divulge contradiction and confusion. Spencer, aware of the difficulty people find getting a ride as a result of the disruption of the roads, stops for a hitchhiker in Kentucky as he passes just north of Corbin. For the hitchhiker, it is less likely that a driver stops for travelers which prods him to pretend to be collapsed on the side of the road. However, he does not believe in the protocols of COVID-19 in relation to putting gloves and donning masks declaring that they are really not necessary as "this whole pandemic thing has been greatly blown out of proportion" (54). Yet, Spencer makes it clear that giving him a ride is conditioned by his abiding by the cautionary measures. He explains that COVID-19 may continue to circulate for years to come, so the hitchhiker would better get used to follow its protocols. The interaction between the hitchhiker and Spencer mirrors more conflicting perspectives; it appears to be another pandemic conversation "in a similar fashion of question/ deflection, question/ parry" (64).

As a matter of fact, the narrative highlights the complementary roles members of the community, as the constituents of the social system need to play in order to recover from the damages of 'cosmology episodes.' Clearly, monolithic interpretation will not work in time of crises. In this regard, in her interview with Weick, Diane Coutu ruminates that in order to survive 'cosmology episodes,' humans should be flexible and not to be subjected to "deadening routines ... [that demand] dehumanizing conformity ... [being] easily programmed to plod along monotonously" (Weick,



"Sense" 84). The argument between Spencer and the hitchhiker attests to the validity of Coutu's presumptions on the need to break conformities and routines.

The hitchhiker identifies himself as a full-time intellect/writer and asks Spencer an insightful question, "Fancy yourself an intellect as well, do you? (58). He adds, "You read mostly or only medicine. At best, you are a subspecialized intellect. There is a world of information to be absorbed. You are barely scratching the surface. If you want access to all of that knowledge, you must be a full-time intellect, as I am" (58). In response, Spencer responds as an ER doctor, "I barely have time to read my journals ... [and] typically thirty seconds to get someone's story" (58). Yet, he asks the hitchhiker about how he can afford to be a full-time intellect. The hitchhiker simply points out that it is the plethora of astounding information that propels him to be a writer. On being asked about his name, the hitchhiker replies, "Typical physician. Treating me like a slab of meat... you should see me as a real human being. A real person. Take an interest in who I am, as opposed to just the problem I'm presenting with" (58). The hitchhiker's words are persuasive because they reflect on the physicians' rigid scientific outlook that addresses intellect and overlook what is personal and emotional. In the hitchhiker 's viewpoint, it is such a standpoint that renders the abstract messages of physicians, especially about pandemic global crises, inaccessible to the common readers.

Correspondingly, the narrative accentuates the significance of moving beyond the conventional confines of managing crises within the spectrum of a definite discipline and by a specific human actor. Instead, creative management of crisis maintains broaching and promoting a wide range of interdisciplinary constructs that draw on "a variety of fields including medicine, sociology, psychology, engineering, logistics, political science and criminal justice, as well as communication" (Sellnow and Seeger, 2). Along these lines, the perception and management of crisis are contingent on an insightful realization of the interaction and "associations among many actors" other than humans; for example, "the internet, the law, the organization of hospitals, the logistics of the state, as well as the climate" (26) as observed by Bruno Latour.

In their "Biocommunicability and the Biopolitics of Pandemic Threats," Charles L. Briggs and Mark Nichter coin the term "biocommunicability" (189) that elaborates on Latour's notions. The term highlights "what factors and actors shape the ongoing production of knowledge about epidemics, how dominant and competing accounts circulate and interact, how people access and interpret information available from different sources, and what they do with it" (197). It is indicated that cosmology episodes of the pandemic can be effectively managed through critical reflections not only on negotiating scientific, medical, technological, intellectual, psychological and political boundaries but

also on intersecting variant constituencies and integrating interdisciplinary critical collaborative insights.

The conflicting insights of Spencer and the hitchhiker in relation to Camodesivir medication as a new anti-viral study drug unfolds a revealing example of negotiation between Spencer's medical perspective and the hitchhiker's intellectual view. In Spencer's scientific perspective, the medication might save his dying wife; however, in intellectual terms the hitchhiker regards it as "Garbage. Doesn't work. It's a combination of drug. Not particularly good at any one thing. ... Big pharma did a good job marketing that one. Not to mention potential deadly side effects" (60). Spencer claims that the hitchhiker cannot decide about the appropriateness of the medication because he is not a doctor or a scientist. Nevertheless, the hitchhiker, who wrote 127 books, points out that he embraces critical ruminations as an intellectual and writes about all genres and topics. Stunned, Spencer asks, "How does the great full-time intellect and writer forget about one of the greatest pandemics to decimate the earth in the last one hundred years?" (66). Asking for water, Spencer passed him two water bottles. When the hitchhiker tries to pass back the bottle after taking a long gulp, Spencer refuses it, "No thanks it's yours". The hitchhiker replies "Ahh, the Covid thing. I keep forgetting" (66).

Spencer wonders how an intellectual writer lives in denial of the pandemic crisis and underestimates its impending threat. Yet, the hitchhiker pithily indicates that it is simply another influenza virus. For him, the specificity that makes COVID-19 different from other viruses is that it is the best advertised virus "in the history of humanity, courtesy of the internet, and brought to you never-endingly by the smartphone" (68). Spencer cannot counter the hitchhiker's premises because he is partly right in light of the fact that "The Sars-CoV-2 virus did have the most intense marketing campaign any virus, ever" (69). Before being dropped off on the highway of Knoxville, the hitchhiker removes his gloves and shakes hands with Spencer who reluctantly thinks that he has to keep his gloves on. Spencer's ambivalent attitude pushes the hitchhiker to state unequivocally, "It's the fear of the virus that will cause the most profound changes not the actual virus itself" (70). Then, he hands him a business card to email him and let him know how his journey turns out. In fact, negotiation between multiple perspectives and disparate insights and disciplines engenders a better perception of the "ambivalence and uncertainty" (Collie, Kindon and Podsiadlowski 218) with regard to 'cosmology episodes.'

Spencer recounts his experience at a roadside diner at a rest station south of Knoxville. It constitutes another episode of conflicting perspectives and spatial disruption. Spencer witnesses the violation of imposed measures regarding spatial restrictions in ambiances of parking lots where there is

a number of cars and trucks. Spencer questions, "shouldn't they be in some sort of lockdown? Shouldn't it only be takeout?" (70). In contrast, Spencer abides by the protocols of coronavirus, parking "a safe distance from everyone else-my little parking spot island-and donned his N95 and gloves" (71-72). Entering the restaurant, he describes the apathetic attitude of people as follows, "People were elbow to elbow, no masks or gloves, passing towering plates of family style food with sweaty hands. If I were coronavirus, I would want to live here, in this place" (73). Those people do not only violate precautionary measures, but are also sarcastic at Spencer's blue gloves and white N95 mask. The matter gets worse with their vehement warning, "We don't need that in here. Take it off or get out. Take your conspiracy bullshit elsewhere" (73). Ironically, had he been ungloved and unmasked, they would have welcomed him. To Spencer's surprise, once he 'took the mask and gloves off, [he] heard a few claps and whoops" (75).

At the restaurant, everything seems unfamiliar, disordered and strange as if Spencer entered a parallel world. Everyone enjoys good food and good conversation as if COVID-19 is not a real thing. The scene alarmed Spencer; thus, he infers that "They weren't the problem, I was, with my silly mask, gloves, and attitude" (76). He goes on to enumerate the infinite list and the most well-known targets hosting COVID-19 such as: the plastic or cardboard packaging, food, "the waiter – his hands, the people around [him], the ATM machine, or cash exchanged at the end of the meal" (75). Spencer's reflection on the possibilities of catching COVID-19 at the restaurant is not surprising. Those people "are experiencing the events directly as victims, participants or crisis managers" (26) as Sellnow and Seeger observe.

The meeting with those people at the restaurant has been a weird and shattering episode; it swirls him with perplexity as to how to conceive the meaning of what is occurring. He ruminates, "I was paralyzed. Not with fear, but with confusion and incomprehension" (73). In his medical deliberations, removing his mask resembles removing an "oxygen tank a hundred fathoms under the sea, or go bare handed during a bloody procedure on an HIV patient" (73). Those people are committing suicide. He bounces back with resiliency and tries to rationalize what is happening, he ascribes the unawareness and apathy of those people to the mis-information and the infodemic that "has infected all aspects of the news, the internet, social media, and daily conversation" (73).

For Spencer the collapse of sensemaking and inability to communicate the intensity of the crisis brings into question his principles of scientific beliefs. He muses, "Maybe it really is nothing more than a bad flu? Maybe this whole trip to help Sarah is ridiculous, a product of your overactive and over informed imagination?" (73-74). Spencer's attitude is marked by oscillation between extremes: ultimate

cognizance of the perils of COVID-19 and the denial of its imminent threat. To put an end to his oscillation and restore his faith in medical opinions about the pandemic, Spencer decides to don his mask and gloves and walked out of the diner.

The last episode in Spencer's odyssey recounts his encounter with COVID-19 hospitalization manifested in Cape Coral Hospital where his wife, Sarah lies. The scene highlights a profound disruption of the healthcare system manifested in the imposed visiting restrictions, the unprecedented emergency procedures, cancellation and /or reduction of services, and the constant demand for specific supplies.

Spencer compares healthcare procedures of Cape Coral Hospital to that back home in Canada. Unable to rationalize the indifferent attitudes of people and the inappropriate hospital procedures, Spencer asks, "What the hell is going on?" (78). In Canada, people avoid "hospitals like the plague" (78) and hospitals parking lots are empty. At the entrance of the Cape Coral Emergency, the situation is different. Spencer proceeds to document in detail more violations of COVID-19 safety measures where traffic is "coming to an almost complete stand-still" (78), and "everything was congested... No masks, no gloves and no distancing. There were shouting matches, even a little bit of pushing" (80). The comparison is highly purposeful revealing a war-like scene at the Cape Coral Emergency. Beneath such a scene lies the common chain of procedures that permeates the globe to manage "stocks of masks or tests, the regulation of property rights, civic habits, gestures of solidarity count exactly as much in defining the degree of virulence of the infectious agent' (Latour 25-26). This chain has one link in common; namely, the "virus does not act the same way" (Latour 25) and so do the people in response to it.

In the Cape Coral, a large tent in front of the Emergency Room entrance of the hospital is suspected by Spencer to be "a temporary triage tent erected to accommodate higher than normal volumes" (79). It seemed to him as if a circus has come down to town. Thinking in terms of safety procedures of hospitals back home, Spencer believes that it may be "a place where patients would be screened for COVID-19 and determined to be hot (suspected of having COVID-19) or cold (unlikely to have cold)" (79). After that, they would be provided with masks and gloves and "then marched into appropriate zones in the Emergency Room" (79).

The chaotic state of the hospital is demonstrated with "news truck, reporters, a police squad car, hospital security guards" (80) trying to impose restrictions on riots and groups of boisterous demonstrators. The scene is ridiculously portrayed with hospital staff being blocked by the demonstrators and herded by the police officers like "celebrities through a group of paparazzi" (88).

Demonstrators astound Spencer with signs declaring "COVID-19 is a lie", "Fake Crisis", "Land of the Free" (80). Florida which is not in lockdown witnesses the same reading of COVID-19 as a lie and protestors hitting the streets. Spencer experiences ambivalent stances; he disagrees with the demonstrators and at the same time he shares though partially some consensual apprehension with them because of their belief in making their voices heard and their thoughts publicly known.

It is a state of equivocation and stupefaction especially with the full lockdown procedures that New York, unlike Florida, has taken in dealing with the pandemic. In Spencer's perspective, the most appropriate way to overcome 'cosmology episodes' and reconstitute a sense of the current situation is to create some other plausible "explanations of what went wrong; why, how, who is to blame" (Sellnow and Seeger 32). He thereby attributes the disparate measures of the States to biopolitics: "It appeared to me that the coronavirus was slowly becoming a misguided and deadly political weapon" (84).

In his attempt to consolidate this assumption, Spencer mulls over what he has read. Various stories online indicate that the number of the infected by COVID-19 were all "widely distorted by government agencies and completely unreliable" (80). On another plane, protestors consider the strict lockdown measures of COVID-19 an "infringement on civil liberties, damage to the economy, over reaction by state government" (84) which, in terms of biopolitics, connotes imprisoning individual bodies into the apparatus of politics. In accordance with such a perspective, Judith Butler argues that biopolitics and "capitalist exploitation find ways to reproduce and strengthen themselves within the pandemic zones."

Another source of interpretation of social media describes the crisis as a conspiracy which might infest the brain; it is "custom-made designed to eliminate the middle class. That effects of COVID-19 were propagated by electromagnetic waves from the new 5G towers" (80). Manifestly, Spencer continually engages in a critical process of integrating multiple "interpretation of information, often from diverse sources" (Sellnow and Seeger 58) to create "shared meaning among and between groups, communities, individuals and agencies, within the ecological context of a crisis, for the purpose of preparing for and reducing, limiting and responding to threats and harm" (Sellnow and Seeger 13). Relying on this assumption, pandemic narrative helps to constitute relationships that are originally rooted in what Eric M. Eisenberg calls 'nondisclosive intimacy' that emphasizes "coordination of action over alignment of cognitions, mutual respect over agreement, trust over empathy, diversity over homogeneity, loose over tight coupling, and strategic communication over unrestricted candor" (160). In fact, elaborating on such compelling characteristics rather than focusing on solutions helps reduce uncertainty and generates experimental alternatives and intelligible collective insight replacing "the

crisis-narrative with a long-term critical and creative effort to find multiple, evolving responses to the structural causes" (Lorenzini 45) of 'cosmology episodes.'

Now, the odyssey as well as Spencer's race against time closes with his target met; he is about to get into Cape Coral Hospital to save his wife. Yet, the security guards' checking of ID's at the entrance of Cape Coral with a large sign saying "No Visitors" (81) compel him to devise a complicated plan: to put the lanyard over [his] head and then [tuck] his ID badge through the V neck in [his] scrubs to hang down in front of [his] chest, hidden from prying eyes" (85). The second step is to hide Camodesivir in the side pocket of his scrub pants. However, he feels struck to the heart because he cannot find the medication which symbolizes the only hope to save his wife and restore his orderly familial life. It is one of the "worst possible failures" (86) in his life. His hands are empty and he has nothing that can help. Then, he realizes that it is the hitchhiker who has stolen it. He blames himself as follows, "The whole trip, for nothing... Why had I been so careless? Why had I left my backpack alone with a total stranger I'd only known for an hour. What was I thinking? (86). He fantasizes that if Sarah died, he would track down the hitchhiker. Despite the despondency that saturates Spencer's entire being, he begins to compose himself together and renews his resolve to save his wife who still needs him. In a tricky manner, he is able to get into the hospital with his ID badge well-hidden under the front of his scrubs.

In contrast to the irrational and disorderly world outside the hospital, the narrator describes painstakingly the world within the Cape Coral ER as a war zone where "stretchers lined every wall. The staff were all wearing full PPE " (88) and ears are assaulted by "cacophony sounds: bells, beeps, oxygen flow, voices, crying, yells, the shuffle of feet, squeaky gurney wheels, and on and on" (89). In order to be as invisible as possible, Spencer puts on a gown, scrub cap, a new mask and face shield. (88). Being unable to contact his wife through calling or texting, he tries to look for her in both the cold and hot zones (suspect or positive patients) of COVID-19, but he cannot make out her facial features from outside the rooms looking through a window especially with the patients wearing oxygen masks. Spencer's deliberation on 'facial features' is highly functional as it highlights how COVID-19 masking reduces perception of face as a whole in the sense that "some aspects of holistic processing would be disrupted by a mask covering part of a face" (Freud, Stajduhar, Rosenbaum, Avidan, Ganel 1).

Spencer cannot detect the face of his wife among the masked faces. He thus ponders on some possibilities that she may have the rebreathing mask and cannot talk, she may be asleep, her phone may be dead, or she may be dead herself. Circling the hot zone again, he finds himself in a COVID-19 positive room where he witnesses the first real COVID-19 patient. It is a significant experiential

encounter because his knowledge of COVID-19 is limited to the "autopsy pictures of Covid lungs in journals" (92) which can be typically described as lungs -like rubbers. For the first time, Spencer restores his identity as a doctor and attains mastery over the disorderly world. His professional inquisitiveness induces him to diagnose the case more accurately as follows,

[The patient] was trying to say something but couldn't get the words out. Her face and fingers were turning a faint tinge of blue purple. Contracted muscles on either side of her neck looked like violin strings as she struggles to catch her breath. Her eyes were wide, as if she were staring into the maw of death itself. (91)

Spencer explains that the patient's respiratory distress is horrifically profound. His direct experience with a COVID-19 patient unveils how it is "*deathly real*" and instigates him to think of warning the indifferent protestors outside. Deliberating on the unavailability of up-to-date supplies, equipment and devices, Spencer cogitates, "*This woman is desaturating, why isn't her pulse oximeter alarming?*" (91). He realizes that there is "nothing amiss with the monitors other than they looked ancient, a mishmash of older equipment jury-rigged for the occasion" (91). The nurse explains, "It was that or nothing" (92). The nurse's words are further evidence of the disruption the pandemic cause to the operations of equipment and supply chain. Poor medical services at Cape Coral Hospital prods Spencer's anticipation of the "worst possible outcome" (93). He circled the ICU, the hot and cold zones, and even the body bags, but he cannot find his wife.

Unexpectedly, Spencer encounters Dr. Fleming who called him in Ontario and told him about Sarah's case. With the help of Dr. Fleming, he finally finds his wife. Spencer's face -shield hinders Sarah's recognition of her husband; so he raises his face shield and steps closer to her. The encounter is really moving, "she wrapped [him] in an illegal hug, tears beginning to flow" (96). However, as his doctor instincts prod him to pull away, he cannot as he needs to feel her.

Indeed, the end of the odyssey proves as eccentric as the world it goes through: it elicits uncertainty, disorientation and discomfort. Sarah has been tested twice and both times are negative. It is not COVID-19, but "a garden variety flu, with a little asthma exacerbation. [Thus] she responds very quickly to the puffers and simple rehydration" (96) as Dr. Fleming explains. Surprisingly, such words invalidate Spencer's anticipations and expectations and, in turn, engender uncertainty and problematize 'cosmology episodes.' Though she gives a scare early on, Sarah has only to complete "the 5-day course of azithromycin, but realistically, she could be discharged anytime" (96). Unconsciously, Spencer's hand reaches for the side pocket of his scrub pants, where he would have stashed the Camodesivir. At this moment, he realizes that his whole "Covid mission really has been for nothing " (99). Then he

reflects, "If I'd have stayed home ... Sarah might have hopped on a flight tomorrow morning and been home by evening. It was all for nothing" (99). For Spencer, it is really unbelievable that Sarah does not have Covid as he thought.

Unlike the linear teleological narrative which is cause-effect driven and oriented by a natural purpose, the closure of the narrative attests to its cyclic construction. It disrupts the chain of cause and effect as it ends where it opens. It starts with an odyssey through the pandemic American landscape and ends with Spencer's flight heading directly to Toronto in the company of his wife. Despite the controversy about COVID-19 imposed restrictions and the real incentives that lurk beneath the function of 'sovereign tools', Spencer and his wife take them into consideration on their way back home. Seated in the plane, heading directly to Toronto, Spencer elaborates on such measures, "I had the window and she had the aisle. Once again, we both had masks and gloves in place, and Sarah lathered sanitizer on every reachable surface. With the second and third waves coming, I presumed this would become the new norm for flying" (99).

Checking his phone before take-off, Spencer noticed an email from the hitchhiker replying to his furious email. So curious is Spencer that he decides to open the email. To his own surprise, there is no text, it contains just "a link to a Pubmed article about Camodesivir published two days earlier and reported a 30% death rate in a large current COVID-19 trial. They had to crack the code to stop the study" (100). The study in fact echoes Achille Mbembe's notion of "necropolitics" which presumes that "the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (11). Preventing him from potentially killing his wife, Spencer decides to send the hitchhiker an apology. For Spencer, everything seems different now that he is with his wife again.

Despite the fact that it is not the medication or Spencer or his professionalism as a doctor that saves Sarah, Spencer can be described as a true hero " exhibiting self-sacrifice, resoluteness, altruistic behavior, rising to the requirements of the situation, and conferring hero status" (Seeger and Sellnow 113). However, his closing words raise the curiosity of the readers, "I felt a strange tickle in my throat" (100). It seems as if he prepares the readers for another suspenseful mission and/ or a post pandemic or repeated 'cosmology episode'.

The open closure of the narrative is comforting because it foregrounds the potentiality and the ability of the individual to "bounce back from adversity and persevere through difficult times, and return to a state of internal equilibrium or a state of healthy being" (Edward 143). In this sense, it incites the readers to perceive optimism as a "duty rather than as something tied to unsteady



expectations of success" ("Small" 45) as put by Karl Weick. Moreover, the core message can be perceived in light of Jean-Luc Nancy's deliberations on the virus as a "communovirus;" namely, the virus communizes us because we have to face it together, even if by isolating ourselves. It is a chance to really experience our community." Since the virus affect people collectively, they have to face it collectively. The same notion has been highlighted in Sontag's short story "The Way We Live Now," which reads: "Well, everybody is worried about everybody now"; namely, during the burgeoning of crises. Accordingly, the narrative enhances the dynamics of collaboration, solidarity, cooperation to survive 'cosmology episodes.' In the words of Toelken, Seeger and Batteau, the narrative "re-establishes core values and precipitate "consensus, cooperation, and support" (p. 47). In this sense, it is collective. John Donne's peroration mirrors the epitome of the narrative concisely, "no man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main ... any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind" (17, Meditation). The message of Donne's meditations is that human beings are part of each other; the loss of any individual is a loss for all mankind. Only through interconnectedness and solidarity can man confront 'cosmology episodes'.

## Conclusion

In fact, *A Covid Odyssey* demonstrates how the pandemic shatters and violates the orderly cosmos of normal life routines, spatial temporal dynamics, and healthcare system on all levels: individual, communal and global. Furthermore, all the imposed procedures have proven imperfect since the transmission and viciousness of the virus have become much more immediate and global. Profoundly confused and overwhelmed by a sense of loss, humans undergo an existential crisis. They lose sensemaking and are imbued with fear, panic and anxiety, and a profound sense of helplessness. They are incapable of interpreting what is going on. In fact, the context of the lack of certainty and expectation engender a deeply psychological sense of distraction and disorientation which in turn creates 'cosmology episodes.'

Despite the nightmarish aura of COVID-19, the narrative has the potential to shift the readers' perception to the fact that the pandemic is not merely an epistemological, intellectual or medical crisis, because human lives are intertwined with other disciplines especially politics. The perilous odyssey of the protagonist to save his wife is a test for this contention. Spencer accepts his heedful coping with the hardships propelled by COVID-19, as a wellspring of wisdom and power. He managed to probe into the incomprehensible landscape of the pandemic. He monitors in detail the sudden changes of the pandemic and the widespread disruption of every single facet of life in order to make sense of what is

going on, and how to react in response. Additionally, he exposes societal and political conflicting presumptions, responses and interpretations of this unprecedented crisis, and he does not exclude any of the interpretations in favor of the others. On the contrary, he juxtaposes all of them as possible and plausible gateway out of the ‘cosmology episode.’

In so doing, the most appropriate ways to manage and survive catastrophic cosmology episodes instigated by COVID-19 is to remodel a new paradigm of reevaluating our roles in the cosmos we inhabit. The only way to construct such a new paradigm is to reconfigure it as an inclusive and as a sustainable house that relies on collective solidarity of integrated, intelligible, prospective and critical worldviews of social, scientific, economic and political basis rather than the biopolitics of the states and experts.

## المستخلص

### الكوارث الكونية من منظور روائي: قراءة تحليلية لنص جراهام إlder "أوديسة كوفيد-19" محمود إبراهيم رضوان

تهدف الدراسة إلى إبراز دور الإبداع السردي في تناول جائحة كوفيد-19 من خلال تحليل "أوديسة كوفيد: قصة جائحة كوفيد-19" للكاتب الكندي جراهام إlder، وذلك في ضوء نظريات ماثيو سيجر وتيموثي سيلناو "سرديات الأزمات" ونظرية كارل إدوار ويك "حلقة علم الكون (الكوسمولوجيا) الكارثية". إذ يقدم النص الجائحة في إطار سردي، فيصور تلك الجائحة على أنها حدث كوني نجم عنه اختلالٌ هز النظام الكوني وما فيه من ديناميكيات الحياة العادية ورويتها، مما أحدث حالة من الفوضى والذعر والريبة والقلق، وتتبنى رواية "أوديسة كوفيد-19" طبقاتٍ دلالية ذات مغزىٍ حول التفسيرات المتناقضة والمتعددة والتأويلات غير المنطقية التي تتضمن إنكار المخاطر والضرر المحتمل، وأثر ما بعد الأزمة، ويقدم الأسلوب السردى أفكاراً ثاقبة وعميقة ونظرةً استشرافيةً تتعلق بهذه التجربة.

كما تسلط هذه الرواية الضوء على أهمية الدور الذي يجب أن يلعبه الفرد في إدارة الأزمات، وذلك من خلال التضامن والتكاتف الجماعي، والانفتاح على الرؤى الناقدة والحصيفة التي من شأنها أن تساعد على إعادة الاستقرار، وإنهاء حالة الفوضى والذعر والاختلال الناجمة عن الكوارث الكونية.

### الكلمات المفتاحية:

إدارة الكوارث والأزمات، سرديات الوباء، كوفيد-19، الاختلال، الرؤى المتناقضة، الفهم والوعي، الجماعية

## Notes

- (1) Catastrophic cosmology episode: In order to understand and analyze a totality of global crisis or a phenomenon which help sustain social construction, Karl Weick borrowed the term 'cosmology' from philosophy for two reasons. First, its combination of rational speculation and scientific evidence. Second, the 'ultimate macro' nature of the term that can be related to cosmopolitan structure such as time, space, change, and contingency. Naturally, people take it for granted that these issues integrate and in response they act as if events are arranged in an orderly manner and cohere in time and space. In Weick's view, cosmology episodes arise when such orderly cosmologies are severely disrupted and collapse. On another level, Orton, James Douglas and Kari A. O'Grady describe the pandemic as 'catastrophic cosmology episode' because of its wide impact on entire nations.
- (2) Among the narratives that examine pandemics as the most devastating form of crises are Mary Shelly's *The Last Man* (1826), Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939), Albert Camus's *The Plague* (1947), Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985), Dean Koontz's *Eye of Darkness* (1981), Nicola Griffith's *Ammonite* by (1992) Colson Whitehead *Zone One* (2011), Emily St. John Mandel *Station Eleven* (2014), and Lawrence Wright's *The End Of October* (2020).

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