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## Emerging from the global syndemic crucible: Finding belonging in a post corona future<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

The covid-19 global syndemic has upended societies worldwide and concomitantly united the world in a shared experience of lockdowns, social distancing, and economic upheaval. In the face of great uncertainty, dystopian realities, and binding government edicts, people's everyday lives, sense of agency, actions, and interactions changed forcibly. Importantly, it has disrupted many practices and routines essential for (re)constituting a sense of belonging, an important element of personhood and individual wellbeing. Using the "Letters from the Future" method, we investigate how individuals imagine and present themselves in the future to navigate this social change. We ask "How do letter writers construct a sense of belonging in a future of their own imagining?" To answer this question, we combine discourse- and text analysis with network analysis to examine 47 letters that Greek participants wrote during the Spring 2020 lockdown. We explore how individuals present and introduce their future self, what *topos* this *self* inhabits and what expressions, values, and practices they perform and negotiate as they reflect on and navigate their

<sup>☆</sup> This paper belongs to a larger project, the Post Corona Futures Project, to which this Special Issue 'Will the World Never Be the Same?' Everyday Imaginaries of Post-Corona Futures is dedicated. The special issue has a unique focus on everyday imaginaries, which is distinct from other foresight and visioning exercises currently undertaken by professional futurist scholars. It offers a collection of papers, to illuminate methodological and substantive gains in understanding everyday imaginaries of post-pandemic futures from a deep interdisciplinary approach to the same dataset. The data consist of 277 letters from writers residing in 33 countries that were collected from April and July 2020 by deploying the Letters from the Future approach. The Letters from the Future approach is a creative writing exercise that aims to elicit a personal narrative in which a possible and desirable future is imagined as if realized (Sools, 2020). Participants are instructed to imagine travelling to a desired future in a time machine and write a letter from that future retrospectively back to the present. Originating in health promotion, this approach was adapted by an interdisciplinary team with backgrounds in the humanities and the social sciences and affiliated with universities across Europe. Early on, the team recognized how the pandemic could be a double-edged sword. The disruptive implications that the coronavirus holds for health, social, and economic systems worldwide, at the same time had the promise of making personal and systemic changes resulting in a more sustainable, equitable, and flourishing life on earth. What is considered a possible and desirable future by lay people from various backgrounds, and how do they envision the pathway to – individually and collectively – reaching those futures? Like the other papers included in this Special Issue, this paper adopts a distinctive theoretical and methodological approach when analyzing a particular subset of the data (i.e., discourse analysis and network analysis on the letters from Greece). As such, it is part of an effort to provide a holistic understanding of how peoples' understanding of what is possible and desirable was shaped by their experience of the pandemic. In particular, this paper shines light on how letter writers imagine belonging in a future world

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relational worlds. By and large, Greek letter writers recognize that inequities and injustices paved the way for the syndemic and express a pressing need for societal transformation.

## 1. Introduction

“Perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition.”

– James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*.

The COVID-19 global syndemic has upended societies worldwide and concomitantly united the world in a shared experience of lockdowns, social distancing, and economic upheaval. The virus has disproportionately impacted vulnerable populations like the elderly, people of colour, the unhoused, and the incarcerated (Daoust, 2020; Hillis et al., 2021; Marcus et al., 2020; Wenham et al., 2020). It threatens the health of essential workers, while measures to contain it, like quarantines, social distancing, and school closings have placed new burdens on working families, small business owners, governments, and people living in difficult domestic situations. These measures may generate subsequent crises. For instance, social distancing can raise the risk of “cardiovascular, autoimmune, neurocognitive, and mental health problems” in elderly populations (Armitage & Nellums, 2020, p. 1). This suggests that rather than a pandemic, COVID-19 is a syndemic (Horton, 2020).

A syndemic is a synergistic epidemic where various variables (e.g., health, socioeconomic, and psychosocial) amass depending on the situation and context in which people live and work (The Lancet, 2017). It involves “a set of mutually reinforcing health and psychosocial problems that generate increased health risk and burden on vulnerable populations” (Batchelder et al., 2015, p. 229). Covid-19's syndemic qualities are put into evidence by how the virus synergistically interacts with other diseases and interfaces with socio-cultural phenomena such as racism, inequality, and stigmatization (Boes et al., 2021; Fronteira et al., 2021).

Understanding COVID-19 as a syndemic accounts for the virus' social origins and widens current perspectives on the disease and its etiopathogenesis. It recognizes that a person's particular exposure to COVID-19 arises from a confluence of factors, including the virus' interaction with other diseases that an individual is exposed to, and their social and individual drivers (Batchelder et al., 2015; Mendenhall & Singer, 2020). As such, maintaining wellbeing during the ravages of COVID-19 relies on more than vaccines and social distancing. It also relies on safeguarding what allows us to maintain a dignified existence, such as our sense of belonging. Belonging is the connection that we as individuals share with the social realm. Finding belonging during moments of intense uncertainty simultaneously involves meaning making, (re)assembling boundaries, and situating identity (Crowley, 1999; Yuval-Davis, 2006) by adapting the multi-faceted dialogical relationships that link the self to culture (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007; Hermans, 2001). In the face of the cascading crises embodied in the syndemic, belonging sheds light on what is socially, politically and ethically at stake, currently and in the future (Bessill et al., 2018).

Even before the syndemic, many already struggled with belonging (Allen et al., 2021; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Some, like the unhoused, experienced acute alienation because of systematic exclusion from “normal society” that label them as deviant or underserving. Others, deal with an impoverished sense of belonging due to prevailing economic and socio-politic imperatives that atomize spaces and routines (Monbiot, 2017). These feelings of disconnection may be amplified by the syndemic, where people confront measures which further isolate them from people, spaces, and routines which help constitute belonging. As Gross (2021) argues, COVID-19 has transformed the material conditions within which life is experienced. Some individuals are sensitive to the virus' syndemic quality. For them, this moment may catalyze a shift in thinking about the future, which can manifest as narrative, or more specifically, narrative futuring.

Whereas futuring involves, “identifying and evaluating possible future events.” (Cornish 2004: 294), narrative futuring involves the construction of a future scenario by developing imagined sequences of events that express a story (Raven & Elahi, 2015). Such creative reflection and imaginings of possible futures are most salient in situations where uncertainty prevails (Milojević & Inayatullah, 2015). Narrative futuring comprises a set of strategies and tools that build resilience to novel and challenging situations, for which we lack a script, so that we can make sense of a new reality while recognizing behavioral patterns that deepen vulnerability. Imagining and anticipating a future that lies beyond the present moment may help the syndemic-riddled people conjure up or re-discover a sense of belonging. By means of narrative futuring pathways to a desired future are mapped and the motivation and strategies needed to confront the hardships of the present are revealed (Liveley et al., 2021; Raven & Elahi, 2015).

Here, we leverage the “Letters from the Futures” method, a technique that elicits narratives that are meaningful, anchored in time, and that can engage peoples' imaginings of what can be possible (Sools, 2020). The exercise of writing a letter from the future allows one to construct a space to which they belong in a time when COVID-19 has greatly limited the physical and social space in which they can roam and find belonging. By-way-of narrative imagining, pathways to new possibilities can be envisioned and a utopian future can be constructed. Such imaginings are connected to Ricoeurian ‘productive imagination’ (Ricoeur, 2016) where narrative mediates between chronological and experienced existential time. Letter writers anticipate how they experience phenomenological time by imagining what will be and situate it in reference to what is – i.e. the syndemic – and what was – i.e. the pre-covid-19 world which was disrupted. By means of employment narrative elements such as events, understandings and perceptions are synthesized and moulded into a personal story and self-transcendence (Ricoeur, 1984). Epistolary allows people to imagine how they might emerge from the crucible of the COVID-19 syndemic in a qualitatively better personal and societal situation compared to where they were at the crisis' onset.

We approach the letters from an interdisciplinary lens which marries behavioural and social sciences. In doing so, we combine

discourse- and text analysis – in particular to identify instances of dialogical belonging- with qualitative network analysis to examine 47 letters that Greek citizens wrote from their future selves during the Spring 2020 lockdown – to examine performative and space-belongingness. Discourse, in being a way of representing, "is a distinction between the things told and the ways of telling them" (Björninen et al., 2020: 438). A distinction is made between story and discourse: Stories and accounts can be improved through an elaboration of events and their organization, how behaviours and motives are explained and portrayed, and ultimately lead to social action (Björninen et al., 2020).

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## 2. Finding belonging in an anticipated future world

Belonging gives people a sense of safety (Ignatieff, 2000), which is why they actively seek it out during moments of intense upheaval. In the context of a syndemic, individuals must navigate simultaneous crises, which requires them to negotiate, erect, and also reconstruct social boundaries. Antonsich (2010) argues that belonging should be analysed both as a personal, intimate feeling of being 'at home' in a place (place-belongingness) and also a discursive resource. Belonging has an inherently spatial quality (Trudeau, 2006): Who can or cannot belong is written in the landscape. Place belongingness manifests when the narrator and her audience both use present and past scenarios to assemble a path that links the present to an imagined future world (Liveley et al., 2021; Ricoeur, 1984). Spatial and emotional markers emphasize those ethical and moral needs that give life purpose and nourish fundamental aspects of belonging such as mutuality, reciprocity, and ease (Brownlee, 2020). Calling on familiar space and place in an envisioned future can help create a sense of belonging (Antonsich, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2006), even in a world that has yet to happen (Liveley, 2019).

Belonging is also a discursive resource that constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion (i.e. the politics of belonging). At the same time, Yuval Davis (2006: 197) argues that "Belonging tends to be naturalized, and becomes articulated and politicized only when it is threatened in some way. The politics of belonging comprises specific political projects aimed at constructing belonging in particular ways to particular collectivities that are, at the same time, themselves being constructed by these projects in very particular ways." When we construct a social space within which we belong, we encounter the power axes which undergird the boundaries between inclusion and exclusion (Antonsich, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2006). These boundaries determine how different groups are represented in society during the pandemic (Páez & Pérez, 2020), with some depicted as heroes and others – e.g. "super spreaders" – as villains. In negotiating these boundaries, people engage in what Crowley calls, 'the dirty work of boundary maintenance' (Crowley, 1999, p. 30), which separates "us from them." This is especially crucial for individuals who have always struggled to belong to "normal society" and who, in the face of drastic social change, are left without a direction along which to map their life's trajectory.

Belonging is both a fluid and ambiguous concept, which finds its shape in the relationships that we build with human and not human objects. Isolation from these relationships causes individuals to re-negotiate and reconstruct their sense of belonging. This process can be explored by looking at the diversely designed pathways or narratives that reproduce belonging (Raven & Elahi, 2015). Additionally, the relationships between these narratives reveal people's capacities, opportunities, and motivations to belong (Allen, 2021). When contemplating the syndemic, a focus on belonging is appropriate because people *need to belong* (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Since belonging is a fundamental driver of human behaviour (Allen et al., 2021), it can shed light on how to be resilient in a syndemic context.

Belonging's ambiguity makes it a meaningful focal point of futures studies (Bissel et al., 2018), which emphasizes the power of anticipation and the possibility of forging relationships in a future time and place. Following (Beckert, 2013), we understand that visions of the future are "contingent interpretations of the situation in the context of prevailing institutional structures, cultural templates, and social networks" (Beckert, 2013, p. 325). Diverse narratives may emerge even when they share critical features or themes (Raven & Elahi, 2015). Thus, they offer a lens into the multiple pathways that can lead to belonging in a post-corona future.

Belonging can be both dialogical and performative (Yuval-Davis et al., 2006). Dialogical constructions of belonging (a dialogue with 'the other' as a need to construct a 'self') refer to how letter writers discursively position themselves and negotiate the surrounding discourses and boundaries. Performative constructions of belonging are specific repetitive practices that relate to specific social and cultural spaces that link individual and collective behavior (Yuval-Davis, 2011), and in which also instances of place-belongingness become apparent (Antonsich, 2010).

The process of generating a narrative from an imagined future can lead to "narrative transformation" through which "it is possible to develop alternative futures which inspire the implementation of different strategies in the present" (Milojević & Inayatullah, 2015). Transformation involves a reckoning with self and society. We analyze the writers' presentations of self within the letters in terms of the questions, "Who am I? And where do I belong?" (Loader, 2006). Belonging and identifying with place in the future is critically linked to feeling safe and well, as Antonsich (2010) articulates: "where you belong is where you are safe; and where you are safe is where you belong." Thus, narrative futuring is used to claim an identity and to situate themselves in a space that is simultaneously geo-physically and socially determined.

Writing about an imagined future is a pathway for shaping and navigating the highly uncertain situations (Vigh, 2009), caused by

the syndemic, where many of the expectations on which letter writers have relied to orient their behaviour are now shattered (Beckert, 2013). By leveraging narrative to anticipate the future, light is shed not only about what letter writers consider to be “desirable or not so desirable futures” but through this, also about their ‘capacity to aspire’ (Appadurai, 2013, p. 13). Narrative futuring, as such is understood as a navigational capacity that encompasses the understanding that everyone aspires. Nevertheless, circumstances can enhance or diminish the capacity to navigate from where we are to where we would like to be. Aspirational capacities arise at the intersection of structural and biographical factors and individual orientation to social action (Appadurai in Vitus, 2021). This mapping of cultural knowledge and manoeuvrability concern, among others, the negotiation of cultural narratives which express themselves also in linguistic constructions (Sools et al., 2017), and often start with the stories we tell about who we want to be and where we want to be. Consequently, investigating how these letter writers narrate the future, can inform us about their narrative navigational strategies in relation to their longing and belonging and longing to belong (Yuval-Davis, 2011).

### 3. The letters from Greece

Greece, and its citizens, are no strangers to crises. Only recently had the Southern European nation begun to recover from the 2008 financial crisis, which struck Greece disproportionately harder than its neighbours in Europe (Kondilis et al., 2013) prompting young people to contemplate emigrating (Chalari & Koutantou, 2021). The country emerged from the financial crisis only to find itself confronted by yet another crisis, one which would test both its financial and moral mettle: the 2015 migrant crisis (Moris & Kousoulis, 2022). These waves of human movement away and towards Greece create conditions where belonging is contested. In enduring these crises many Greek citizens have engaged in an extended period of critical reflection regarding their liminal existence, life’s uncertainties, and belonging (Sools et al., 2017; Triliva, Sools, & Philippas, 2020). The COVID-19 syndemic, a novel crisis, compounded and intensified such reflections and concerns.

The first reported incidence of Covid-19 in Greece was on February 26, 2020. At the end of the year, the total number of confirmed cases of the virus in Greece was 138,850, with 4838 of these infections resulting in death. On March 16, the Ministry of Health began to provide daily televised updates on the pandemic’s development and its impact in Greece and abroad. During these broadcasts the team provided information regarding protective measures, the number of cases, hospitalizations, and deaths and discussed the public health reasoning behind the government’s emergency response. To complement these efforts they distributed printed and electronic posters with instructions for citizens regarding the necessary protection measures. Beginning on March 23 measures started to ramp up beginning with significant restrictions on the circulation and movement of citizens (with an obligation to send a text message to the central government or fill out a written permit when leaving home). When venturing outside their homes, citizens had to present identification and, in some cases, certificates to patrolling police officers. Those who flaunted these rules were fined. These measures were extended multiple times and would remain in place until May 4.

A heated political debate focused on the health and science vs economy dilemma divided the governing party and other political parties. There was talk of misinformation regarding the number of hospitalized, hospital protocols, and ICU availability. The continuation of church services became a contested issue, since other social events halted. The ban on demonstrations raised issues of democratic rule, rendering the pandemic a political, economic, and rights issue. It was against this backdrop that the letter writers wrote their Letters from the Future.

### 4. Material and methods

Sixty-seven participants<sup>1</sup> from Greece contributed letters to our study during the first wave of the COVID-19 syndemic. Our focus on these syndemic letters is purposive. As has been theorized, belonging has a hegemonic and ubiquitous quality which is why we take it for granted and hardly perceive it (Yuval-Davis, 2006). When we are confident about our belonging in the past, present, or future we do not need to actively consider it, although it steers us and our choices. Thus, it is only when it becomes contested that we actively consider belonging. A pandemic, while large in scale, does not necessarily signal a shift away from our previous life-course. Once a scientific and governance solution is found, we can “get back to normal.” Instead, a syndemic requires people to take stock of their belonging in the present and the future. Thus, these letters are interesting for our study. Eighty-two percent of our letter writers identified as female, 16 % identified as male, and 2 % identified as other. Most (27 %) of them were 25 – 34 years old, and we received letters only from female writers in the 20–24 age cohort.

Our analyses unfolded in four phases. In Phase 1, we read all 67 letters and conducted a structural analysis to identify key themes including space, time, and belonging. In Phase two, a subset of letters was selected based on the following inclusion rule: we would include only letters that go beyond the public health dimension of COVID-19. The resulting dataset includes 48 syndemic-rich letters. In Phase 3, the dataset was organized in terms of whether the letter writer envisions themselves as taking a time machine to the immediate future, the intermediate future, and the far future. We categorized as belonging in the immediate future all letters written in 2020 (11 percent), as belonging in the intermediate future letters written between 2021 and 2025 (54 percent) and as far future letters written from 2030 and beyond (35 percent). Our letters span from 2020 to 3021. Letters reveal that the syndemic and its solutions are critically oriented by time. The pandemic and the ensuing syndemic disrupted and breached the rhythms and routines which are markers of time. Futuring thus has a temporal dimension. Time helps us navigate our social and natural worlds; therefore, it is a

<sup>1</sup> Two hundred and seventy-seven participants residing in thirty-three countries wrote letters to the future (see accompanying Method Supplement).

requisite scale on which our lives are scrutinized. Time both manifests in narrative and serves as a mechanism through which people attain value from narratives (Ricoeur, 1984). In the time-vacuum generated by the initial COVID-19 lockdown, the time picked by each letter writer is in itself telling. Where people choose to travel to involves an aspirational element. Letter writers exercise agency by, for example, situating their narratives at a time when they envision the pandemic's resolution. Then, two team members conducted network visualization and discourse analysis in parallel (these methods are described in greater detail below). The discourse analysis elucidates (though not exclusively) dialogical belonging, while the network analysis is primarily used to examine performative and space-belongingness. In Phase 4, the team critically analysed and integrated the results of these analyses. To our knowledge, this is the first study which combines network analysis with a discourse analysis within a narrative futuring paradigm.

**Network visualizations** include a range of tools that reveal patterns that emerge from relationships between two entities of interest. Entities can be anything from cells to individuals and even concepts that can be linked together through their interactions. For example, semantic network analysis is used to understand current knowledge on a topic, by tracing the relationships ascribed to concepts in textual data (Doerfel, 1998). Here, we take a similar approach. In a first step, we break the text apart into storylines. A storyline has a beginning, an end, and other key features of a plot (e.g. a challenge, revelation, villain, hero) (Raven & Elahi, 2015; van Hulst & Yanow, 2016). Some letters included multiple storylines while others included a single storyline. Then, by means of a qualitative content analysis in Atlas.ti, we isolate and identify narrative elements like characters, settings, plot, conflict, and resolution, but also including strategies like personification, metaphors, and values within each storyline. In a third step, we assigned relationships to elements based on their co-occurrence in a storyline, and generate a network matrix which we use to visualize the network.

Our data visualizations are performed with the program gephi. In the visualizations, the size of each element tells us how often it is used *in relation* to other narrative elements in the text corpus. Where the letter writer situates themselves in the narrative can be illuminating. As our aim is to examine belonging, we examine where the *Self* is located in these maps and perform a cluster analysis to examine which elements are used most frequently in relation to the concept of *Self*. These are elements detected in storylines where the letter writers describe themselves as belonging (e.g. on their balcony or in a forest) are demarcated by their dark grey shading, while non-grey elements were found in storylines described as populated by other characters (e.g. nurses, school teachers, immigrants) but not the letter writer. The dark grey circles are elements within the boundaries of where letter writers belong, while light grey circles lie proximate to them, but still outside their boundaries.

Discursive text analyses is inspired by Fairclough (2007) and others, who look at texts as social events by building on a Foucauldian take on discourse. Discursive text analysis departs from the idea that social agents are not 'free' but neither are their actions totally socially determined, they do however structure texts and set up relations between elements of texts (Fairclough, 2003, p. 22). Discursive text analysis therefore takes a closer look at the structure of texts, as these simultaneously display the system-level constraints of this process alongside the author's agency. For this article we took a closer look at the sequence of the letters that marks a specific beginning or origin and is organized around questions like how and why one's life has developed as it has. In other words, letters are often narrated from a perspective designed to give one's life direction and purpose or to create some *sense of security and wholeness* (Ewing, 1990; McNay, 2000; Willemse, 2007). We analysed how the letter writers '*argumentative position*' themselves, relating the internal world intrinsically and intimately to the surrounding world (Billig, 1991; Buitelaar, 2006; Holland, 2001). Next to vocalization and positioning, we took a closer look at intertextual instances in the text, whereby *intertextuality* is understood as the phenomenon that all texts acquire meaning by implicitly borrowing elements from other, already existing texts, 'inserting history in a text and the text into history' (Kristeva, cited in Fairclough, 2007, p. 102). Epistolary is a genre which stimulates an interaction between letter writer (who in this case is not yet in existence – our future selves) and a recipient (without any experience of the future) which may encourage the letter writer to be more reflexive and interrogate their place in larger society. Discourse analysis brings to light these reflexive self-representations, and the epistlers' use of intertextuality as they position themselves in a future that they narrate.

## 5. Belonging against the backdrop of the syndemic

Within the syndemic crucible, the virus is understood from a socio-ecological systems perspective (Batchelder et al., 2015), which requires the consideration of social, institutional, and environmental factors alongside the biophysical factors of an epidemic. Belonging emphasizes a person's intimate connection with all three of these factors and the absence of this interrelatedness signals that one's sense of belonging is contested. Disconnection manifests as a sense of being lost, or of loss. Some letter writers describe the drama, explaining that such devastating losses, upended lives, and death and destruction are signs that those who violate (human) nature will be punished.

Social disparity is another key theme. The syndemic has exacerbated health disparities in vulnerable populations that are confronted with social (economic, essential work) and structural barriers. According to the letters, the deep and accelerating inequality worsened by stay-at-home and social distancing orders impacted people who had to work to feed their families in a different way than non-essential workers or more privileged groups. Immigrants, refugees, those with disabilities, and other marginalized groups are described as experiencing these disparities more intensely than the general population.

Another source of disconnection is COVID-19 governance. Some letters focus on fundamental weaknesses in prevailing institutions. A public health discourse is present in the letters, and the letter writers relate to it in different ways. For instance, public health policy was described as "*oppressive*", "*restrictive of civil liberties*", "*draconian*", and related to "*incarceration*", "*confinement*", "*internment*", and "*captivity*." Such terms were used to describe the curfews, SMS sent to go out, and the "checking" or "interrogation" by the police who were enforcing the lockdown and social distancing. Some letters insinuated that the pandemic furnished the government with a ready-made excuse to ban protests, quarantine cities, and close borders bringing about a faltering of democracy, civil liberties, and rights.

Other letters focus on the undue hardships that these measures placed on individuals. The social distancing, isolation, and cut-off from in-person work, schooling, and other contexts where people relate engendered another crisis that participants described as a loss of humanness.

Some letter writers clearly aspire for a return to normality. In these restitution scenarios, letter writers identify the actions that need to be taken to resist the syndemic (Frank, 2012) by making those sacrifices which are required to re-establish a desired state of normality. For example, they place public health at the centre of value creation and economic growth. In letters that describe a strong and sustainable public health system as a prerequisite for vanquishing societal inequities, an illness of the body—a health issue becomes a political issue.

In other letters, the pathway towards belonging is complex, encompassing multiple and convoluted storylines. These letters point to the weaknesses within the current system, and display neoliberal values which require radical change. They echo the call for new, radical solutions that are already present in the ether of public discourse and protest movements (Monbiot, 2017), but remain weakly anchored in day-to-day practice. Central to these letters is the discourse on the unsustainable economy vs. health dilemma. They describe how COVID-19 has made crystal clear the many weaknesses of what they call the “*capitalist system*,” which has reverberated into a socioeconomic syndemic. The socio-economic uncertainty that many letters exalted, “*is not new in Greece*,” requires fundamental changes in the country’s and – perhaps the world’s – political economy because chronic economic uncertainty and insecurity is now the lived experience of a large swath of the population. Desiring collective change, letter writers make a claim on citizens, civil society, and public institutions, arguing that people’s health and safety depend on collective action entailing critical consciousness-raising about inequality and the dynamics of labour and capital. Via critical consciousness-raising people can take an analytical look at themselves and their lifeworld and ask whether they are who they want to be, or whether they have lost allegiance to dreams of a better world where they would like to belong. Letter writers pose the same questions about society at large (Narvaez & Mrkva, 2014).

### 5.1. Immediate future scenarios

Table 1 lists the most prominent elements which (i.e., the larger dark grey nodes in the visualizations) which are most frequently connected to *Self*. It also shows the most prominent elements (larger light grey nodes), that are described in letters but not in the same storylines involving the *Self*. As indicated by its size, *Self* is prominent in the letters to the immediate future. Rather than observers, narrators describe themselves as being actively engaged in the future world. Among them, younger letter writers anchor their future imaginations more closely to a familiar society, hinting at a resistance to missing out on a life that they expected. As a 19-year-old puts it into words: “*Personally, I no longer want to miss any opportunity, to upset anybody, or to delay something because, as I realized a while ago, everything changes from one moment to the next*” (#86693). They long for performances involving human connection and touch in their futurist placemaking. “Sharing”, “hugging”, “kissing”, “understanding”, “experiencing freedom”, “appreciating each other”, “appreciating and taking care of nature” are practices and performances of belonging that can be recognized in many of the letters (Yuval-Davis, 2010).

Placemaking as part of future belonging occurs in familiar surroundings: *Self* is most frequently situated in Rethymno, Hospitals, Schools, and Nature or the Outdoors. When letter writers assign action (e.g. “*This Easter, I’m going to church, to light my candle.*” #16834), place limits (“*Do You Remember when we were quarantined? When we had to send a message to get out of our house?*” #78709), or articulate values (e.g. refuge, freedom, respect, responsibility) in relation to space, they emphasize what turns a space into a home (Antonsich, 2010).

Nature is another critical space in which letter writers long to belong. Part of the placemaking happens outdoors, in the city park, the beach, or a balcony. The sounds and scents of their surroundings and cities are part of such placemaking: “*Cars*”, “*horns*”, “*children’s laughter*”, “*happy voices*” and “*adult voices.*” Nature flourishes in the absence of human activity and an emotional shelter or refuge. Letters describe cleaner air, less pollution, birds chirping, and “*the cicadas burst into laughter and laughter!*” and “*it smells of nature.*” Nature is described as awakening and rebirthing: “*And yet in the seas, there are more fish, I feel that the environment is breathing again.!!! It*

**Table 1**  
Prominent Narrative Elements in the Letters from the Immediate Future.

	Within boundaries	Outside the boundaries
Character(s)	Friends Family	People Greeks Government Past Generations
Settings	Hospital Outdoors Nature Rethymno School	City
Plot	Easter	Cycle
Conflict	–	–
Resolution	Human Connection Solution (Love, Hope, Solidarity) Quarantine	Tradition Health Vaccine Economy







dialogical belonging (Yuval Davis 2010) to the Christian community, but the boundaries between these different communities and spaces of belonging are imagined as more or less permeable. The boundaries separating people like her who have a Christian morality from others can be crossed because everybody can become a better person. But also, the boundaries between past and future are permeable, as change is not projected as absolute but as conditional (Ricoeur, 1984).

So Easter as a performance of belonging is narrated in several of the letters as a practice that separates the pious Greeks from the rule breakers, “Respect, kindness, solidarity prevail. All for one and one for all. Hygiene habits are a priority for all people. Everyone is vigilant regarding handwashing, and sneezing in your elbow, they have become habits for everyone.” It is here where among the syndemic letters from Greece, what Antonsich (2010) calls “place-belongingness,” is in full evidence. These Letter Writers also connect themselves to the scientific Solutions to COVID-19 including Quarantine and Hygiene measures. They justify their support for these measures by emphasizing core values like Love, Solidarity, and Hope. Many participants were optimistic that vaccines and medical advances can eradicate COVID-19, however some were dubious that vaccines would be accessible and free. (Fig. 1).

5.2. Intermediate future scenarios

In the near future scenarios, there is much less emphasis on the *Self*. Moreover, *Self* is located distantly from scientific solutions to the virus, as well as the *Technologies* that have changed how people work and live. Instead, and as is summarized in Fig. 2, *Technology* connects to *Self* through *Work* and is seen as an oppressive force that replaces mundane human experiences. *Technology* becomes the mode through which people experience life, particularly young people who live vicariously through computer games and videos. All the milestones which make up part of “normal life” (sex, buying a car, etc.) are in the near future experienced through *Technology*-based spectatorship. However, *Technology* may also bring opportunity. For example, telecommuting permits a letter writer to move to the countryside.(Fig. 3).

Government is placed distantly from *Self* (See Fig. 2 and Table 2). Visions of the near future describe the negative conditions triggered because government managed COVID-19 as a pandemic rather than a syndemic. For instance, #69571, “Social isolation that was supposed to be temporary came to stay. The economy and the way of governing have changed radically. More and more authoritarian policies are being implemented and the people are not reacting, because they consider it a measure to prevent the spread of a new virus that may be reappearing.”

Taken from a discursive textual analytical angle, this letter is a good illustration of a future scenario in which the *Self* receives less emphasis and government is distanced from *Self*:.:

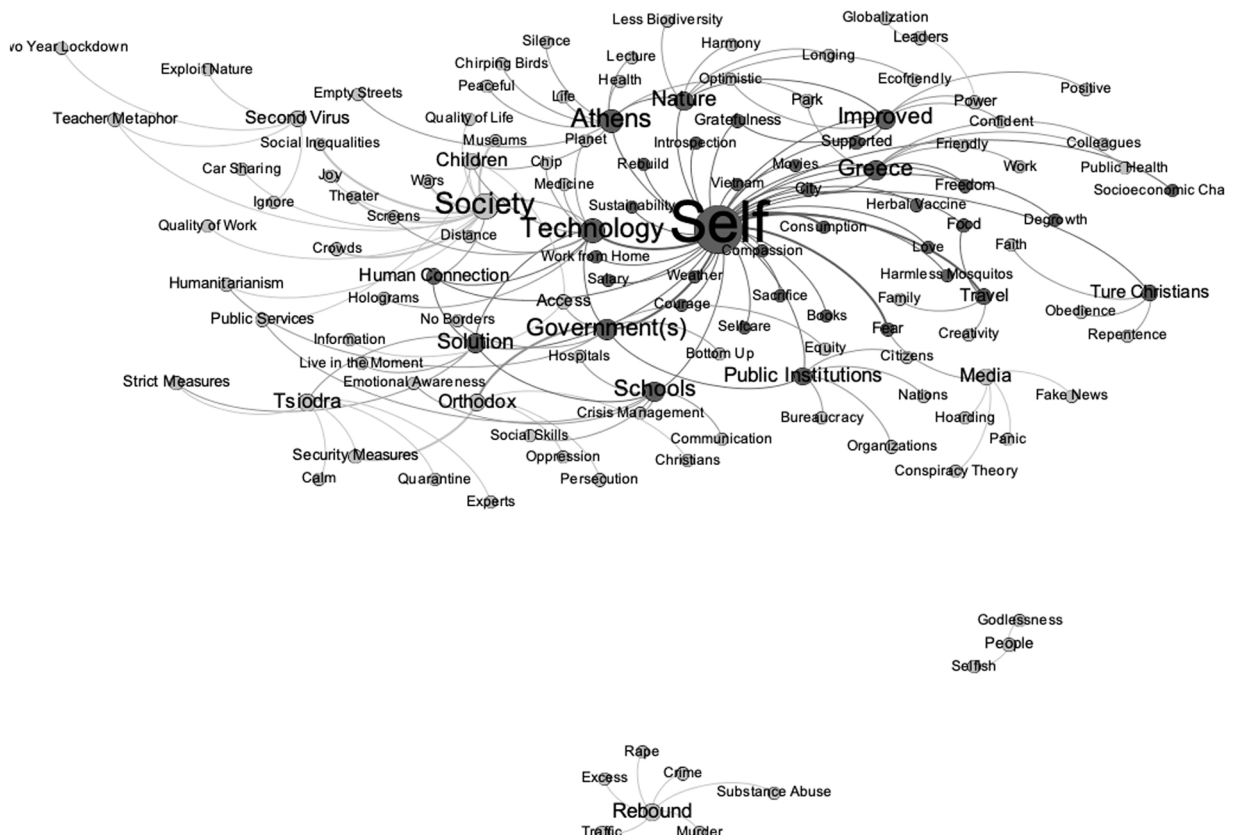


Fig. 3. Visualization of the Network of Narrative Elements, Far Future.

**Table 2**  
Prominent Narrative Elements in the Letters from the Near Future.

	Within Boundaries	Outside the Boundaries
Character(s)	–	Society Government People
Settings	School Nature	–
Plot	–	–
Conflict	Fear Job Anxiety Uncertainty	Science Fiction Technology
Resolution	Human Connection	Solution Economy

*“Governments have hired more staff and upgraded the infrastructure of hospital units, but mainly these are cosmetic changes. People’s mental health has undergone the greatest change. No one is as you remember them. People were divided into two main subcategories. Those who after the end of the coronavirus have decided to make changes in their lives and even reconsider the reason for their existence. Those who came out stronger and want to live before they die.” #69571.*

This distancing is acquired throughout the letter by talking about others which results in a frequent use of: “people” “those people”, “those”, “they” “those who”, there is almost no vocalization of herself in the letter except for at the very beginning and at the end of the letter:

*“My old self, don’t worry about me. I now attend my classes normally; I can go out to some degree and everything is fine. But I would like to give you some advice. To live every moment, every second as if it were your last. Appreciate even the walk to the supermarket you are allowed” # 69571*

Problems also arise due to conspiracies, propaganda, and hoarding behaviours while the economy fails as a consequence of fear and individualism. All of which are proposed to stem from the scientific and non-humanistic approach to COVID-19.(Table. 3).

### 5.3. Far future scenarios

In large part, letters from the far future envision fundamental societal change. Sometimes, letter writers included multiple dystopian scenarios in their letters. Some letters adopt a science-fiction writing style. For example, one letter includes two dystopian scenarios (#40138). One scenario discusses a second virus with more devastating impacts on Greeks while another describes a society that rebounds into excess, indulging in its most base tendencies including murder, substance abuse, and rape. #40138 suggests that this is a response to the extreme repression of the COVID-19 measures. Technology features greatly in these scenarios. For example, #35790 writes, *“Everything is done with the help of technology, and human relationships have broken down, people live on their cell phones. They do not notice the poverty and misery of other people. Nature has been destroyed, and there are holograms of trees and animals. Life is miserable, depressing, odourless.”*

In other letters, society is described as moving through a phase of collapse before achieving transformation. For example, #42336 recounts, *“I’m glad that even after so many deaths, they got the message.”* The death and devastation are seen as part of a cycle that links collapse to transformation. Similarly, #35010 writes, *“I don’t want to upset you, but I can’t lie to you. Difficult days followed, times with great economic insecurity. But there is an unexpected positive news that I want to share with you and it is a result of this period.”*

*Self* is frequently described as belonging to radical transformation scenarios. Indeed, in the transformation scenarios in the far

**Table 3**  
Prominent Narrative Elements in the Letters from the Far Future.

	Within Boundaries	Outside the Boundaries
Character(s)	Government(s) Public Institutions	Society Tsiodora Media
Settings	Schools Athens Nature Greece	–
Plot	–	–
Conflict	–	Second Virus Fake News
Resolution	Human Connection Technology Solution	Measures

future “Self” transforms. The spaces the *Self* occupies, the actions self takes, and the values and emotions the *Self* embodies transform dramatically. “I was a victim of over-consumption. I was buying and buying things. now I understand that I shouldn't. I should spend my time and energy on human relationships ” (#87863). A transformation of *Self* is paralleled by a societal transformation. These letters also describe how *Self* transforms alongside *Government* and *Public Institutions* like *Schools*. Letter writer #35941 explains, “I don't miss the fact that governments don't exist anymore. Things are working differently now. Humans have reached higher levels of consciousness, so there is no “stupid crowd” to be deceived by anyone.” While #42336 describes new ideas about education, “The changes that have taken place in schools are also catalytic. Courses in communication, social skills, crisis management, and emotional awareness and competence were infused in the curriculum.”

It also becomes clear from the discourse analysis, that letter writers who position themselves in the far future, tend to speak more with a collective voice, as can be illustrated for example in # 40138's letter:

“We've learned through the worst fashion that engaging in such actions entail losing yourself. Everyone's cooperation paid off. Technology helped, and now we could do a lot of things from our home almost automatically, having more time for ourselves and our loved ones. If anything brought change, it was togetherness!”

Looking at the sequence of in this letter, #40138 starts telling her story of an imagined future and the direction she creates in it, to give it some purpose and some sense of wholeness (Ewing, 1990; McNay, 2000; Willemse, 2007) is accomplished by, next to picturing a prosperous future, start speaking in form the *Self* (the first person, “I”) to telling from a collective voice (of “we”), as illustrated in the quote above. Thus, relating her internal world intrinsically and intimately to the surrounding world (Billig, 1991; Buitelaar, 2006; Holland, 2001).

#### 5.4. Solutions are hidden in plain sight in the narratives

Letter writers reckoned with their belonging in future and present scenarios and relate causal links between economic development, disappearing biodiversity, climate change, and pandemics. In doing so, they embed action statements within the stories, pointing the way to societal and social strategies for overcoming the syndemic. These solutions are hidden in plain sight and can be revealed by taking a critical look at the letters.

A first solution is learning. The metaphor of the “Teacher” is used to describe COVID-19 and the letter writer, a student. For example, #78709 writes, “If the quarantine and the coronavirus situation taught me anything, it's to enjoy every moment of my life.” Learning a lesson from the syndemic is emphasized and if people will learn, change is around the corner: “Here's another good thing about quarantine. There was no anxiety. Time did not run - it just flowed. People no longer seem to be dependent on time. They don't seem to care about living to spend; instead, they spend enough to live. Don't despair, my friends! You're having a hard time, I know. but in a short while, everything will be fine!” (#18676). Some letters present a counter-narrative. Here, COVID-19 is described as a teacher and Greeks as errant students. #86400 opines: “I believe that in a little time, everything will return to normal. It will be as if the pandemic never happened. What it gave us and what it took from us will be forgotten. We will continue to waste what nature offers us, have ephemeral relationships, kill animals, and be hypocritical.” Learning from the syndemic is the solution to alienation and forges a pathway to belonging.

In this regard, we highlight letter writers' shared focus on “humanness.” Or, more specifically, as the combined network and discourse analysis point at, they argue that *neoliberalism* must be replaced with *humanism*. People are described as losing their humanity, transformed by a capitalistic and materialistic system into robots or by an increasingly oppressive regime into animals. The participants described how social distancing, the rise in the use of communications technology and isolation from in-person work, schooling, and other contexts where people relate engendered another crisis, one that participants described as a loss of humanness (Brooks et al., 2020; Stephenson, 2020). The pivot towards humanism often links the social to the personal, within which the pandemic as a community level problem requires individual level solutions. This is especially clear in the far future scenarios, but is ubiquitous throughout. In the near future scenarios for example, the discourse analysis points out that letter writers negotiate and long to change particular governmentalities (Foucault, 1991), as #52778 points out when she sees humanism as occurring in the future among medical staff: “In the old days, the doctor would only look at your wallet and “the envelope” (bribe) known in Greece.” #52778. Here *intertextually* points to the governmentality of corruption which is a widespread and well-known practice in Greece at all levels of bureaucracy and life and has become a way of governing. Governing in the Foucauldian sense is concerned with the construction of ourselves as moral agents, involving practices that shape our choices, desires, aspirations, needs, wants and lifestyles and eventually our subjectivities (Hunt & Wickham, 1994). In short, the Foucauldian perspective on government seeks to connect questions of governance, politics and administration to the realm of bodies, lives, selves and persons. It is at this level that many of the letter writers situate change. The change letter writers “long to belong to” (Yuval-Davis, 2011), is situated in the narrative strategies at the level of how people construct themselves as moral subjects.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

Belonging and feeling that one is part of a larger symbolic entity enhances meaning in life and can provide stability and a shared social identity (Lambert et al., 2013). Belonging can be challenged but also re-imagined during moments of personal and societal upheaval. Here, we combined discourse with network analysis and examined the narrative strategies used by letter writers to re-constitute a sense of belonging.

Our results suggest that belonging is socially determined: Relationships give meaning to life. Letter writers describe care duties that they offer people who are in their charge (e.g. psychologist assisting teachers and students), warmth shared with a stranger (e.g.

hugging old homeless man on a Rethymno beach), and also care for people the writer is unlikely to ever meet (e.g. staying at home in solidarity with the elderly or saving seeds for future generations). They voice a commitment to nourish and further cultivate their relationships with family and friends, recognizing the importance of these long-lasting relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). We chose letters that describe how the health crisis influences the contexts in which life is embedded. These letters address the syndemic's impact on workers, families, equality, civil liberties, education, the environment, and humanness. Across them, it is clear that COVID-19 has had repercussions on how the writers perceive belonging.

The syndemic has made it clear to letter writers that the feeling of being "at home" is socially constituted (Antonsich, 2010). It dually blurs and heightens common societal divisions, at times creating new ones (Paez and Perez 2021). Regarding the former, the syndemic has blurred the lines separating public and private spaces. For example, home and school or work overlap as writers increasingly perform public acts in the privacy of their homes. Additionally, the boundary separating spaces where the government decides from where individuals decide are blurred causing some letter writers to decry the state's intrusiveness. Finally, whereas home was once a refuge, the outdoors — especially nature — becomes the new refuge. In articulating the blurring of boundaries, letter writers project themselves into that space where they want to belong (e.g. the outdoors, the sea, the city centre).

We study belonging in the future so we can understand the present. We propose that belonging, more specifically the need to belong, is a core motivation that drives people to imagine the future. Exploring people's capacity to aspire for belonging in an imagined future is a particularly useful exercise in the context of the covid-19 syndemic, which has uprooted people's lives and isolated them from fellow humans, from familiar spaces and places, and from every day routines. In other words, imagining belonging in the future, can help us understand who we are today. As Yuval-Davis writes, "Identity as transitional, always produces itself through the combined processes of being and becoming, belonging and longing to belong" (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p. 26). When people aspire to belong in the future, they also making a claim on society: they claim a right to movement, to shelter, to a dignified livelihood, and to make plans for the future (Yuval-Davis, 2011). By making a claim on the future and carving out a space for themselves in it, through narrative, they are claiming the right to have rights (Arendt, 2007). The ability to articulate such claims can raise individual resilience to disruptions like the syndemic, while shining a light on how we can collectively transform in order to prevent future tragedies.

Greece's crisis-ridden past was evident in the narratives. An ensuing economic syndemic was highlighted and tied to past uncertainties, precarity, and liminality (Sools et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the emigration narratives that dominated in previous crises (Chalari & Koutantou, 2021) did not appear to occupy the letter writers' psyches. Belonging and seeking refuge in the country's natural world and one's humanness were tied to the syndemic's ethical imperatives. Letter writers also observe these tendencies and in so doing, offer alternatives. The syndemic letters provide a moral inventory that they utilised at a time of great suffering and the spiritual epiphany they experience in the face of great uncertainty not only about life but also of the planet, the natural world, and all living things (Narvaez & Mrkva, 2014). Hence, the drama not only deals with human losses, but also violations of nature, the animal world, and the environment.

The selected letters synthesize philosophical ideas and psychological insights at a time when people worldwide, question their fortunes and hope to master their fates. They represent the positive side-effects of reflection, pondering, wondering, and imagining. In their descriptions of the loss of humanness and belonging, participants explained how social distancing led to difficulties in emotional responsiveness, prosocial warmth ("touching"), empathy and sympathizing with diverse others (Brooks et al., 2020; Sagar et al., 2020). They described how people's ways of relating changed impinging upon their basic needs (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020) and resulted in a demise in moral sensibility, social consciousness and emotional expression (Cantarero et al., 2021). "Their narratives provide "thick descriptions" of the future scenarios constructed by letter-writers (Milojevica and Inayatullah, 2015), which we put into focus through our analysis. These descriptions are concretized by the narratives' use of familiar and imagined new or transformed spaces to construct place-belongness in the future.

The letters were collected during the first wave, when the syndemic was most disruptive. Since then, vaccines have been introduced, borders have re-opened, as have many businesses and schools. Had the letters been written today, they may have been strikingly different, perhaps echoing the pivot in the political discourse from prevention to recovery. Traces of the syndemic do remain. The synergistic health social interactions have impacted the mental health of people around the world (Brühlhart et al., 2021; Shim & Starks, 2021). Thousands of children were orphaned during the first wave (Hillis et al., 2021). And the labour market continues to feel the consequences of the virus' gendered dimensions (Wenham et al., 2020). The fearfulness triggered by the pandemic has exposed some healthcare workers and infected individuals to violence, the consequences of which are longstanding (Fronreira et al., 2021). We do not know if writers sensitive to the syndemic in 2020 would remain sensitive to its impacts at the present time, and how that would shape how they narrate their future imaginings.

In the course of imagining these future scenarios, authors update their understanding of what is possible in the future given the new conditions instigated by Covid-19 (Gross, 2021). Imagining the future through narrative futuring and letter writing are creative processes that involve critical consciousness-raising and taking a moral inventory which can bolster letter writer's moral sensitivity, judgment, and intentions for the future (Narvaez & Mrkva, 2014).

The present study has some important limitations. First, we are producing an analysis without knowledge of each individual letter writer's particular context. This weakness is mediated in our study by the expertise and deep knowledge on the Greek context afforded by two of the authors. Second, the data collection approach used (see Method Supplement) heavily relies on the social networks of academics. Thus, those who are particularly vulnerable to the syndemic such as the unhoused, the elderly, front-liners, and essential workers were unlikely to participate. Their letters may better reveal the potentialities and limitations of the "Letters from the Futures" method and could be the focus of future work. A third, limitation is the absence of a cross case comparison with letters written from another country. This weakness may be addressed in future work.

Future work may apply a deeper discourse analysis to more fully examine the contours of the crisis. The combined approach that we

develop and use here can be used in future studies to examine other traumatic events such as natural disasters, wars, and forced displacement, and make use of data collected by other means. Applied again on the Letters from the Future, and more closely guided by Ricoeur's work, networks that link past, future, and present scenarios can be constructed and examined to interrogate the liminal spaces generated by the present disruption. A comparison of these networks could demonstrate how participants select which aspects of living and belonging to bring forward, and which to leave behind, revealing how time is socially construct and values are prioritized on the basis of what has been, what is current, and what is yet to come. The approach offers clarity on future pathways, strategies to resolve challenges, and issues that lie at the heart of these challenges.

The syndemic letters provide a moral inventory with which writers engaged at a time of great suffering and the type of spiritual epiphany they experience in the face of great uncertainty not only about life but also of the planet, the natural world, and all living things (Narvaez & Mrkva, 2014). Hence, the drama envisioned in the letters not only dealt with human losses, but also violations of nature, the animal world, and the environment. Here we see that how people construct themselves as moral subjects, in their letters often goes against or partly subverts dominant discourses. In other words, they call on concepts like social and environmental justice, humanness, moral sensitivity, and judgement. In doing so, many letter writers express hope for societal transformation and dismay at the idea that we will return to how it was before. Even letters that envision and long for a return to normality through modest societal change make a promise to themselves to change for the better both to achieve this outcome, and to sustain it. Across the board, relationships with "others" from family members to colleagues, and even homeless strangers are seen as a cornerstone of change. Importantly, the Greek letter writers recognize that inequities and injustices paved the way for the syndemic. They reflect on the underlying social infrastructures which have put Greece on the trajectory leading to the future that they envision. Many reappraise what is essential (i.e. family, traditions, nature, and human connection) and what is less so (e.g. markers of social status like luxury cars, unreliable media, and genetically modified organisms) and make use of narrative to cement their commitment to these values in their own lives.

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## Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at [doi:10.1016/j.futures.2022.103034](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2022.103034).

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