WITH COVID-19 taking center stage in our lives in 2020, we are all faced with new perspectives on our jobs and the resurgence of old inequalities. On the one hand, the coronavirus jumpstarted a digital transformation in our work and research that no one really anticipated. Prejudices against the digital and lacking technical infrastructure be damned, this virus dragged us all into the virtual realms of cyberspace whether we wanted to or not. While some cling to the minimum translations of analog to digital and hold fast to the ideal of face to face human interaction (hello, to all those administrators who thought Fall 2020 was going to be just another day in HE), others opted to become more creative. We have seen orchestras play virtual concerts from hundreds of different living rooms, world leaders convene in digital meetings, people take digital vacations, and we got Captain Picard (yes, I know) reading Shakespearean sonnets so that we would be inspired. The possibilities of virtual worlds seem as endless as Vernor Vinge, William Gibson, and Neil Stephenson predicted in the 1980s and 90s.

And yet, on the other hand, we also saw that our world had become more entrenched in its inequalities, that some were disproportionately more effected by the virus, as we experienced “the divide between a managerial class that can be shifted to work from home and a worker class, low-paid, without significant savings, and (in the United States) even lacking health care benefits that must nonetheless put itself at daily risk of infection,” as Gerry Canavan noted on Facebook. Technology is a dividing factor between those who have access to it and those who control it. This is a claim that Karen Cadora had noted 25 years ago, when writing about cyberpunk, which imagines a world where technology is a tool of both oppression and liberation. Poverty is pervasive in cyberpunk, and technological resources are expensive luxuries. Those without access to […] them are effectively kept in the underclass” (359). Well, in corona-times it works both ways and then some. Not having a job that allows you to self-isolate and work remotely, not having access to stable internet, to high-end computers, to technological systems that replace physical interactions with the world comes at a high price in a pandemic, a price that black and brown communities pay
doubly. Intersectional discrimination is enhanced through technological inequality.

So, when Veronica Hollinger wrote in a testimonial for the first CyberPunk Culture Conference that she believed the CPCC was “an opportunity to test-drive our critical posthumanism, to be aware of the intriguing complexities of our material participation” I understood this to speak to both of these described effects of the coronavirus on our academic realities. We are becoming—with the machine, scarilly so in E. M. Forster’s sense but also as Donna Haraway means it. Our technologies become surrogates for our interactions with each other. A digital-only conference on cyberculture, then, seems ‘meta’ in that it addresses issues that influence its own materiality. And, not to forget, our material participation is dependent on our social and political circumstances. While many would have loved to come to the SFRA conference (or any other physical meeting), not only the virus but also financial, social, or political obstacles stood in the way of this. And this is true even without the virus at work.

When all plans were cancelled this summer, I wanted to organize an event that takes a different approach, not just out of necessity of a raging pandemic, but as a chance to critically reflect our material participation and our posthuman existence. The CyberPunk Culture Conference was that event, morphed from a planned roundtable discussion and book launch of The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture that I co-edited with Anna McFarlane and Graham J. Murphy. Building from the idea that cyberpunk is not only an important genre of sf literature, but a cultural formation that speaks immensely to our moment in time and is ideally situated to map our realities, I started to think about what would make the CPCC.

In terms of theme, the conference was open to all interested in cyberculture and the 32 papers presented show an amazing breadth of scholarship, from fashion to music, from holograms to social media, from classics to brand new works of culture, from Turkey to Japan. In addition to the 32 individual papers, we also had a keynote by the fantastic Pawel Frelik, whose musings on the political myopia of cyberpunk are worth a longer discussion, and the above-mentioned roundtable with the editors of the Routledge Companion and two contributors, Sherryl Vint and Hugh O’Connell. We had a lively discussion of how “Living in Cyberpunk Times” and all the utopian and dystopian moments that go with it. If you have not had a chance to look into it, read up here in this symposium issue of SFRA Review, or head on over to www.cyberpunkculture.com where all of the papers are still available to watch and read.
Works Cited

