

Foreword to the Special Issue on Environmental Science Fiction

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This issue arrives in the midst of a moment of apocalyptic imagining, if not, perhaps, the version of the apocalypse we thought we were expecting. Seen by many as a kind of “dry run” for the sorts of system-wide economic shocks that will become more and more common as climate change intensifies—a test that our leaders have plainly failed—the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the fragility, insufficiency, and sheer ineptitude of nearly all of our political and social institutions in an era of massive social crisis. Coronavirus has likewise unveiled much about the way that precarity is unevenly distributed along the lines of race, gender, class, age, and (dis)ability, and made visible the shocking incapacity for imagination of a political elite that would, apparently, prefer to send hundreds of thousands to their deaths, and catapult the world into a prolonged economic depression, than consider even the most provisional and temporary change to the way that global capitalism hoards its wealth. It seems little wonder, then, that outside the halls of entrenched power, this moment has also become one of radical political possibility, with massive (and massively popular) Black Lives Matter protests continuing to spread both across the United States and around the globe. In the United States and Europe, coronavirus has awakened a great many in what used to be the political center to the final inadequacy of capitalism—and to new recognition of the weird, new, and utterly post-normal world that global capital itself has wrought. We need to think differently; our lives now depend on it.

Some have thought of COVID-19 as a kind of “bonus” catastrophe—a crisis that we didn’t see coming, and which does nothing to halt the terrifying onrush of climate change. In a sense, this is true. But, as the bracing end of *Contagion* (dir. Steven Soderbergh, 2011)—viewed by so many people during the pandemic that it returned to the top ten on iTunes nine years after its initial release—reminds us, a pandemic is an ecological crisis, too. In

Contagion’s final moments, the origins of its fictional MEV-1 pandemic are traced (in a story unknown by any of the film’s characters) first, to a moment of natural-habitat destruction that displaces a colony of bats; second, to unsanitary industrial agricultural conditions that allow the bat to infect a team of hogs awaiting slaughter; and finally, to a Hong Kong casino where it infects its Patient Zero, Beth Emhoff (Gwyneth Paltrow), an executive from an American multinational conglomerate visiting China on business. Many people misread the ending as a moralistic comment on the Paltrow character’s adultery, but that is a complete red herring in the actual progression of the disease. MEV-1, like coronavirus, like the Spanish flu of 1918, like the Black Plague, became a global pandemic not because of divine punishment or diabolic bad luck or immutable natural law, but because human institutions created the conditions for its spread and prevented its timely suppression. And the very same forces of ideology, repression, denial, and control that have failed us so catastrophically in the COVID-19 crisis have been failing us with regards to the environment for fifty years, too.

This special issue of *The MOSF Journal of Science Fiction* refuses any such shuttering of the political imagination. In pieces that discuss topics ranging from the breakdown of human territoriality in Jeff Vandermeer’s *Southern Reach* trilogy to animal cruelty in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* to the X-Men’s founding of a radically post-capitalist mutant utopia on the sentient island of Krakoa in the recent *House of X* arc (2019)—not to mention articles and reflections on Octavia E. Butler’s *Fledgling*, Paolo Bacigalupi’s *The Windup Girl*, Sam J. Miller’s *Blackfish City*, and a host of others—the writers for this issue articulate revolutionary critiques of the existing relations between people, capital, animals, and nature that are intensely urgent for the moment of the Anthropocene. Through these interventions, we can see clearly how neither science fiction nor



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science fiction studies can remain silent in this moment of global omnicrisis—and how the genre still shows us, both through its grimmest apocalyptic imaginings and its loftiest utopian dreams, the glimmers and splinters of futures that might yet be better than the bad one our rulers have chosen for us.