

Imagining Futures Together: On Science Fiction and Resilience



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One of the most remarkable outcomes of the past year of crisis is how we have begun to confront the stakes and politics of shared imagination. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to imagine the lives of strangers in depth: their fears, their choices, their moments of discipline and failures of will. Every masked and distanced interaction is a new imaginative exercise in completing a face or an intention obscured by the pervasive disruptions of the disease. The parallel pandemic of racism that surged back into the headlines in the midst of COVID had similar effects, pushing millions of people to imagine the visceral impacts of racial injustice and structural violence on the lives and bodies of others. The marches and protests marked a sea change in the long history of racial oppression in the United States, a shift in mood so sudden and profound that it seemed almost science fictional. Speaking of fiction, the horrific events of January 6, 2021 at the U.S. Capitol served as a third reminder of the power of shared imagination, playing out a drama of insurrection in which various actors were reading from vastly different scripts, in entirely different genres. The continuing aftermath of that day demonstrates the massive fissures, or imagination gaps, separating different sides of the American electorate, and the heavy cost of those gaps. These dramas in the United States have many counterparts around the world, with the pandemic driving a new global consciousness of risk and collective choices.

Shared imagination drives history: an idea becomes articulated into a worldview, an ideology that explains not just what has happened but what must happen next. A successful ideology accumulates followers who use it as a filter and a mission statement for organizing and reshaping reality. The intensity of shared imagination this past year, the speed of change in large-scale world-historical systems, is greater than anything I have experienced in my lifetime. The only points of comparison during my own forty years are other major inflections in the shared imaginary of modern planetary culture: the gradual collapse of the Soviet Union from the late 1980s to early 1990s and the removal of the unique counterweight it provided to global capitalism, and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the unending wars that were launched in their wake. Yet the pandemic has introduced more change, more quickly, than either of those turning points, because the force it exerts on world affairs continues to multiply, rather than dissipating after a single cataclysmic impact.

The inspiration for the *Us In Flux* series of stories and conversations that led to this special issue is the question of shared imagination, and its link to resilience. How do we get better at imagining together? What does it mean to share a vision of the future, to work towards something? In an essay for *The New Yorker* in May 2020, celebrated science fiction author Kim Stanley Robinson argued that our response to the pandemic showed our capacity for real change. Alluding to the work of critic Raymond Williams, Robinson argued that we need to develop new “structures of feeling” to contend with a reality that is shifting beneath our feet.

These events, and others like them, are easier to imagine now than they were back in January, when they were the stuff of dystopian science fiction. But science fiction is the realism of our time. The sense that we are all now stuck in a science-fiction novel that we're writing together—that's another sign of the emerging structure of feeling.

When we think back on the impact of the past year, we will measure the shifts in collective action and global consciousness as well as number the dead. The lessons of resilience we must learn from COVID are precious and urgent; we will need to learn how to think together about structural racism and spiraling economic inequality, about climate and capitalism, and about the growing challenge of how we practice truth and empathy in an increasingly fragmented world of algorithmic culture.

A tall order at any time, and especially now as the world reels with the continued onslaught of the pandemic and the gradual worsening of all the other crises it has temporarily pushed out of view. It is up to us, not just to imagine a better future, but to share that vision, find common ground and new structures of feeling to change the game in the present. Yoshio Kamijo and his collaborators have shown that imagining future generations in a decision process, asking someone to speak for them and advocate for them, dramatically shifts collective thinking towards the long term. This is, ultimately, an act of worldbuilding, of science fiction as a practice for creating more inspiring and inclusive futures. And it is at the heart of the work we pursue at the Center for Science and the Imagination: to create new practices and collaborative networks of imagination, and to act as if we really are all writing this science fiction novel together.

In his book *Building Imaginary Worlds*, Mark J. P. Wolf argues that there are two things that almost never change in our stories about what might be: causality and empathy. Without a sequence of events, a fundamental rule structure for the universe, we cannot invest ourselves in the action and struggle of a plot. Without characters with whom we can identify on an emotional level, we cannot care for a world and its inhabitants. Causality and empathy remain two of our great challenges, our collective blind spots, in imagining positive futures. The stories featured in this special issue work to draw our attention to those oft-neglected aspects of envisioning the future. Whether we are seeking out meaning in the patterns and interactions of human and non-human systems, as in Kij Johnson and Regina Kanyu Wang's stories, or questioning the boundaries of self and other, as in stories by Sarah Pinsker and Chinelo Onwualu, we are constantly testing and reinscribing the rules of the world through the fictive simulations that we construct and share.

One of the greatest gifts of science fiction is that it allows us to look beyond our comfortable assumptions about causality and empathy. We never quite do away with them, so essential are they to our own narrative processing of reality. But we can transform them utterly, imagining the political hegemony of anarchy in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, or how interspecies reproduction might upend the stakes of individual agency in Octavia Butler's *Dawn*. Where most of the stories we tell ultimately reinscribe the same causal lessons (actions have consequences; look before you leap), science fiction allows us to imagine reasoning and feeling in different ways.

What the stories of *Us in Flux* remind us, and what this year of tragedy and emergency has shown us, is that causality and empathy become invisible and unquestioned if we ignore them and take them for granted. They can become blind spots, sources of hamartia and false assumptions. Left untended and unconsidered, they can deceive and derail us.

To fix our broken futures, we need to attend to these two blind spots of causality and empathy. The pandemic has led us, forced us, to contend with the lives of strangers in intimate, inspiring, heartrending depth. We are living through a painful causal revolution with every new mutation and public-health challenge, an epidemiology of causes and effects. The growing realization that COVID will continue to circulate, and our disparate lurching attempts to cope with its consequences at individual and collective scales of action, reveal the blind spots that brought us to this place, that made the pandemic and its consequences such a bitter surprise.

In a remarkable article on the role of imagination in perception, “Minding the Gap,” Etienne Pelaprat and Michael Cole describe the human eye’s unceasing saccade movements as an essential aspect of visual perception. If cameras and sensors contrive to hold an image—say of a single, printed letter—precisely in place, fixed in relation to the retina, the image fades to gray for the subject, losing its distinctiveness and becoming invisible. The eye sees by constantly sampling the visual universe, and seeking out boundaries and edges, by glancing across the real over and over again. In biological terms, we perceive discontinuously, taking repeated samples of reality and sending them up the brainstem. The imagination, these authors argue, then steps in to assemble a continuous experience from these pieces, stitching together a fantasy of completeness, of embodied solidity, from the fragmentary samples of our senses and our own memories, presumptions, and continuing self-narratives. Causality and empathy begin here, in the tireless story-building engines of the brain, activating memory and mirror neurons, nostalgia and anticipation, to spin a tale of the self and the world. Psychologists who study resilience marvel at the ability of some people to take on setbacks and discouragements without losing the thread of their narrative, without being unduly discouraged or disordered by them. Resilience is the ability to find a way past unpleasant surprises and either resume the story where it left off or revise it on the fly to incorporate new information.

Science fiction is a training ground for imaginative resilience because it allows us to practice alternative causalities, alternative empathies. It reminds us that the impossible is not impossible to imagine. The exercise of exploring what could happen if we changed the rules is essential training, now more than ever, because it is becoming increasingly clear that the old rules have failed us. If we are going to survive not just this pandemic (and the next one, and the one after that) but the rising tides and temperatures, the rapidly attenuating pyramid schemes of the ultra-rich, and our teetering commitment to global democracy, we need to understand causality and empathy in a deep and flexible way. In order to create better futures, we need to imagine them together, including those who have been displaced, disenfranchised, and disenchanted by the mounting challenges of the twenty-first century. We need to think of imagination as a process, and maybe as a duty: part of our broader responsibility toward future generations. This is a structure of feeling,