

# Introduction

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As the first two decades of the twenty-first century herald an era of climate change and ecological and species demise on a planetary scale, this special issue centers the perspectives of writers, artists, activists, and scholars of color to explore survival and regeneration. The compendium critically interrogates the supposed universal notions of a shared planet, ecological demise, and what it means to be human. It showcases critical engagements with the notion of a "shared planet" that enable timelines, histories, perspectives, and futurities to refuse linear, colonial time. For Indigenous and racialized people, the notion of a future has never been a given. Whether through the policies and practices of state-sanctioned genocide, slavery, internment, or forced relocation and migration, people of color have found ways to survive their worlds ending over and over. To cite Kyle Powys Whyte (2017) in his discussion of Anishinaabe restoration practices, it is "our ancestors' dystopia now" (206). Yet it is only now, in the beginnings of the twenty-first century, that the idea that humans may not have a future is taking hold in the popular settler imagination. The panic surrounding the end of the world, it turns out, was rooted in the assumption that it is the end of the "first world." A special issue on critical approaches to studying the catastrophes of "our shared planet" must begin with a few comments on the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the inequalities it laid bare, and the eruption of racial uprisings in the past year and a half.

On May 25, George Floyd was murdered by a police officer. As the virus cleaved communities in expected ways, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement gained even more momentum amid—and not despite—the global COVID-19

pandemic. Protests spread globally as well as in smaller towns and rural areas across North America. On March 16, 2021, the Atlanta spa shootings resulted in the murder of eight people, six of whom were Asian women: Daoyou Feng, Hyun Jung Grant, Suncha Kim, Soon Chung Park, Yong Ae Yue, and Xiaojie Tan. Indebted to the blueprint and lessons learned from BLM, Asian-identified migrants organized during an intensified moment of anti-Asian racism as COVID-19 was racialized as Asian. Community organizers responded to Soya Jung's (2014) call for a "model minority mutiny" to understand how that myth—that Asians are the "good" minorities—will not nor has ever protected them. In May 2021, almost exactly a year after the murder of George Floyd, the remains of 215 children were verified to be buried at Kamloops Residential School (known as American Indian boarding schools in the United States) on the unceded land of the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc in what settlers named Canada. Overnight, public and communal installations of children's shoes appeared on the steps of governmental buildings and art galleries across the country. Since then, dozens more school grounds have been excavated across Turtle Island, and the list only continues to grow. The stories of missing Indigenous children run deep across the entire continent.

These recent events by no means exhaust the apocalyptic stories in which so many communities of color are currently living. Rather, they provide some of the context many of our contributors were not only writing about and responding to, but also living through: the uneven distribution of livability on an unshareable planet. The convergence of the pandemic; the murders of people of color, including children; and racial uprisings and protests constitutes a culminating moment of a slow disaster (to borrow from Rob Nixon's formulation of "slow violence" [2011]) that has been brewing for some time: the results of rampant, racial capitalism that thrives on the extraction of resources, labor, lives, and land from Indigenous peoples and people of color. Here was the world that speculative fiction writers such as Octavia Butler had been telling us about all these years. Although published in 1993, *Parable of the Sower* reached *The New York Times* bestseller list for the first time in 2020. Although many read her for her prescience and uncanny predictions, the brilliance of Butler's work is that it never takes this world for granted and never assumes this world is the only one possible. What the *Parables* trilogy speculates on is not impending disaster, but how (not if) we are to survive it. Importantly, it does so through the perspective of a young Black woman, showing what is enabled when race is foregrounded in imagining speculative futurities.

Critical inquiry into climate change and its impacts have taken off as interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary endeavors with activists, artists, and academics scrambling to make sense of what it means to be "living on a damaged planet" (Tsing et al., eds, 2017). Despite the growing body of scholarship on climate change and species extinction, much of it still assumes or reiterates a linear, settler colonial timeline of development and demise. Constituting what Chela Sandoval (2000) refers to as a "methodology of the oppressed," "a set of

processes, procedures, and technologies for decolonizing the imagination" (68), the cultural forms included in this issue respond to the ways impending global impacts of climate change often lead to universalizing assumptions that promote colonialist power hierarchies and exacerbate, not eradicate, racial inequalities. Although scientists continue to research and debate whether humans have surpassed the point of no return on our shared planet, it is the work of cultural producers and critics to articulate how neither the idea of "our shared planet" nor the "human" have ever included "us all." "Articulation," according to Stuart Hall (1986), "enables us to think how an ideology empowers people, enabling them to begin to make some sense or intelligibility of their historical situation, without reducing those forms of intelligibility to their socio-economic or class location or social position" (53). Rather than considering race as a peripheral or ancillary extension to such planetary concerns, the collection posits racial formation as central to it. Our collection is, thus, focused on two interconnected goals: 1) to interrogate the racial politics of survival and demise, abundance and apocalypse and 2) to imagine new worlds in ways that do not reiterate familiar versions of Western liberal humanism and recuperation. Overall, the issue is focused on anticolonialist, anticapitalist, and antiracist visions that promote socially just futures of our planet. Drawing from Julie Sze (2020), we are committed to cultural forms that envision "environmental justice as freedom" (9, emphasis added).

The issue is bound by a commitment to speculative and multitemporal artistic creations that critique, reject, or exceed settler colonial timelines of catastrophe, both future and past. Speculative fiction, a genre associated with scientific discovery and colonialist adventure—histories that have been hostile to populations of color—becomes a powerful medium when picked up by writers and artists of color. Whether it is Betsy Huang's (2010) argument that Asian Americans can "retool" the genre, "providing different narrative lenses for revising generic imperatives and epistemologies" (102); Grace Dillon's (2012) observation that "Native slipstream thinking, which has been around for millennia, anticipated recent cutting-edge physics" (4); or Jayna Brown's (2021) assertion that "unburdened by investments in belonging to a system created to exclude [Black people] in the first place, we develop marvelous modes of being in and perceiving the universe" (7), there is a deep tradition of Indigenous scholars and scholars of color who understand how speculative fiction can illuminate the time and place of those who exist out of sync with settler temporality. As well, speaking specifically of a future for queer people, José Esteban Muñoz (2009) calls for a "collective temporal distortion" that rejects the hegemony of straight time (185). The issue, thus, engages recognizable speculative fiction by Octavia Butler, Cherie Dimaline, Ruth Ozeki, Wilson Harris, and others and also the work of artists and activists who have been imagining, organizing, theorizing, and living in worlds that many assumed—and still assume—impossible: viable worlds of community care, mutual aid, harm reduction, and transformative justice. As guest creative editor Walidah Imarisha (2015) notes elsewhere, "all organizing is science fiction.... For those of us from communities with historic collective

trauma, we must understand that each of us is already science fiction walking around on two legs. Our ancestors dreamed us up and then bent reality to create us" (3, 5). This sort of centering of the literary, artistic, and activist speculation of people of color committed to better worlds can reclaim, in Aimee Bahng's (2018) terms, the notions of speculation and risk from capitalism's future.

Putting into practice Sandoval's "methodology of the oppressed," we bring together in one place artistic and creative works, activist and curatorial essays, a plenary transcript, an interview, a critical review, a short story, and a syllabus and class assignments alongside peer-reviewed essays. We include a variety of work by activists, visual artists, creative writers, students, independent scholars, and scholars embedded in academia, all of whom answered the call for how to think through planetary demise without succumbing to settler colonial endings. Many of the authors and artists in this issue exist in and blur the boundaries of multiple worlds: academia, activism, and art. In the transcript of "Writing New Worlds," an Allied Media Conference plenary held virtually during the pandemic, the conversation opens with the famous words of Toni Cade Bambara, who noted that the role of the artist is to make revolution irresistible (2012). The pages that follow are filled with the knowledge, theories, and creations of a wide range of people of color invested in imagining otherwise: "culture workers," as Bambara may have identified. In this way, the issue supports *American Studies*' commitment to scholarship that is "accessible to a variety of readers, not solely to academic specialists" so that it may be insightful and appealing to social activists and potentially useful sources for classroom teaching. The work of climate justice demands no less than this type of expansive, creative, and speculative engagement.

Including ourselves, our guest creative editor Walidah Imarisha; two graduate student research assistants, Ifeoluwa Adeniyi and Piu Chowdhury; and our contributors, we total 32 scholars, activists, and artists of color from across the world currently located across three regions of North America: Canada, the United States, and the Caribbean. Together, our work contributes to the "comparative, international, and/or transnational" scope of *American Studies* to engage in a longer discussion regarding the place and possibilities of ethnic American cultural production, including those of diasporic, transnational, and Indigenous peoples and cultures that exceed (and have always exceeded) the parameters of the nation-state. Broadly defined notions of what constitutes U.S. cultures and histories provides productive critiques of U.S. exceptionalism, particularly in the context of climate change as a global phenomenon rooted in colonialism and racial capitalism.

Abolitionist activist and scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2020) insists that "freedom is a place." Our issue evokes spaces both familiar and new: Chicago; Washington, DC; New York; and Oakland as well as the Pacific Ocean, Guyanese hinterlands, Amazon rainforest, an alternative China, and other entire planets. At times, it pauses upon a cluster of trees, a Target store, on an unnamed sunny beach, and at the molecular level of the COVID-19 virus itself. Through

critical engagements with such myriad spaces and at a range of scales, all of the contributions to this special issue share one common assumption: the end is not the end. Disaster serves as a portal of sorts, as Arundhati Roy (2020) recently described. It enables us to see what else is possible, including taking careful stock of what we would like to bring with us through it and what will be important to leave behind. The artwork, which is introduced in more detail in the following creative introduction, is dispersed throughout the volume so that they are equally positioned as critical interventions. The critical essays bridge the art and creative pieces and vice versa.

Appearing on our cover designed by **Alexis Pauline Gumbs** and mentioned consistently throughout, the works and thoughts of Octavia Butler buttress the entire collection. The first of two mini art curations opens with the Afrofuturist visions of artists **John Jennings, Kamau Grantham + Stacey Robinson as BLACKMAU**, and **La’Nora Boror aka Echo Artist Healer**. In **Reynaldo Anderson** and **Sheree Renée Thomas’s** accompanying essay, they reflect on their experiences of co-curating virtual art exhibitions during the pandemic, respectively, titled *Curating the End of the World* and *Red Spring*. The focus on critiques of dystopia and/as reality is sustained in **Celiese Lypka’s** “Métis Survivance: Land, Love, and Futures in Cherie Dimaline’s Dystopian Novels.” Through multiple frameworks of Indigenous theory, including notions of “survivance,” “landedness,” and “decolonial love,” Lypka traces how the novel’s Métis characters navigate a world devastated by settler colonialism in order to redefine community. Also concerned with Indigenous resistance, **Hannah Regis’s** “Trajectories of Resilience: Indigenous Healing Folkways in the Selected Short Stories of Wilson Harris” focuses on works of the Guyanese and Windrush generation writer from the 1970s already concerned then with ecological destruction. Regis examines how Wilson’s fabulous fiction is formed by his engagement with Indigenous worldviews that did not function according to colonial notions of time and space. Through his distinct lyrical form, Regis shows, Harris is able to not only reframe demise but also assert abundant futures. Located between these two essays, **Darcie Little Badger’s** contemplation of death, grief, and tree rings outside of a bedroom window resonate quietly and powerfully as an ecological understanding of human emotions. **Dani McClain’s** short story, “Homing Instinct,” ruminates on the choices of its protagonist to be rooted or to wander within a nation wrecked by climate change, questioning whether biological kinship is the only way to make a safe community.

The transcript of a virtual plenary at the 2020 Allied Media Conference titled “Writing New Worlds” features writer–activist–scholars **Alexis De Veaux, Alexis Pauline Gumbs**, and **Walidah Imarisha** discussing visionary fiction, tangible futures, and histories that never happened. Relatedly, **Smaran Dayal’s** “Octavia Butler and the Settler Colonial Speculative: *Xenogenesis* and Planetary Loss” asserts how speculative fiction enables reengagements with history, not to offer mere allegories (of past worlds), but rather to understand history as continuous and expansive. As well, **Ifeoluwa Adeniyi’s** interview with fantasy writer **Rebecca**

**Kuang** explores the aesthetic and political possibilities of considering history, and not just the future, through the speculative genre. The notion of histories that refuse to stay neatly in the past is also a concern of **D.E. St. John** in his article, "Our Toxic Transpacific: Hydro-Colonialism, Nuclearization, and Radioactive Identities in Post-Fukushima Literature." Drawing partly from Mel Chen's work on queer and racial animacies, his essay focuses on representations of the Pacific Ocean in the works of Lee Ann Roripaugh and Ruth Ozeki that depict it as both a site of hydrocolonialism as well as irradiated possibilities for Asians and Asian American embodiment. Extending such critiques of humanism, **Edmond Y. Chang's** review essay, "'Do They See Me as A Virus?': Imagining Asian American Environmental Games" walks (or, rather, plays) us through a cluster of recent Asian American games created by Asian Americans that also explore the relationship between race and environmentalism, including two that directly and creatively challenge the racist conflation of Asians with the COVID-19 virus.

Chang's essay is followed by his syllabus on Asianfuturism and descriptions of assignments to give a sense of how research manifests in the classroom. Pedagogy, after all, is a practice, and in this sense, the work of teaching is often the first site of putting theory to practice for educators. Woven in between the pieces that discuss theory in praxis—the artmaking process of cultural activists, designing video games, and teaching and pedagogy—is art that documents activism. **A.J. Hudson** photographed the 2019 Climate Justice Youth Summit in Brooklyn he helped to organize and which took place only a few months before the pandemic reached New York. The images capture a moment just before masks became a common accessory when in public. Hudson's accompanying creative essay boldly asks—and answers—the question that sustains our entire issue, "the end of the world, for whom?" **Ananda Gabo's** illustrations were used as promotional materials to start a community biology lab in Chinatown, Toronto. Critical of the exclusionary nature of professional science, the community project aimed to amplify ancestral knowledge and learn how to bridge the gap between the two. Such artworks document the practices of community organizers devoted not simply to social change, but rather social justice.

The final pieces included in the collection return us to the immediate moment. The cowritten "The 2020 Social and Environmental Apocalypse: Reimagining Black America" by **Tatiana Height, Olivia T. Ngadjui, Fushcia-Ann Hoover,** and **Jasmine A. Dillon** commemorates a moment of convergence between COVID-19 and racism, exploring how an Afrocentric analysis lays bare how environmental injustices are racial injustices and vice versa. Black activists' calls for inclusion, recognition, voice, destruction, and revolution are calls for reimagining space as space remains fundamentally unshareable within settler capitalist logics. Their essay is followed by a reprint of select artworks from a 2013 exhibition curated by **Mariame Kaba**, *Picturing a World without Prisons*, that reimagines spaces in radical (and radically mundane) visions of abolition. This second mini art curation features the works of **Veronica Stein, Silvia Ines**

**Gonzalez**, and a collaboration between **Sarah Jane Rhee**, **Cadence**, and Kaba, all of whom envision abolitionist futures as possible now. Together, they exemplify Gilmore's assertions that "what the world will become already exists... abolition is presence, it is life in rehearsal." It is the choices Indigenous peoples and people of color make every day to create the world in which we live, the choices we strive to make every day to create the world we all deserve, over and over again, day in and day out. Our issue concludes with **Kaanchi Chopra's** larger-than-life illustration of a brown-skinned goddess that takes up all the space. She is a wonderfully monstrous, unapologetic, and uncompromising mythical creature that cannot exist but has always existed, everywhere. She's right here.

Our call for papers was released in February 2020 and within a few short weeks the world changed. But in many ways it merely magnified the ongoing crises within which communities of color have long lived. This special issue came together through a global pandemic. Contributors created and curated art, submitted and revised multiple essay drafts and responded to ceaseless emails all while caring, worrying, and sometimes grieving for loved ones. This type of labor should not be normalized, and we find it important to draw attention to this. We acknowledge the labor, commitment, and care of creators of color working on the concerns of this special issue in and for their communities during a pandemic that continues to exacerbate existing social inequalities. In our view, doing so constitutes a more expansive, ethical, and relevant understanding of research than academia traditionally defines. We hope that the issue reflects—and does not smooth over—all that the contributors went through and are still going through.

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