In this issue, we offer a range of articles that cover a wide array of topics and issues. Song and Fergnani look at pandemic films with an eye toward social imaginaries leading to scenarios to provide insights on how future outbreaks can and might be navigated. Next, Zaidi puts forward a methodological meditation on how archetypes can leverage systems thinking and patterned-hope stories can and might break cycles of negative narratives. Anthony reflects on teaching critical futures studies in China with a focus on impacts across the educational landscape in contexts where such approaches are nonexistent. Kuusi and Heinonen analyze the Millennium Project’s Work/Technology 2050 study. Finally, Carson pens an essay that centers on the role and place of futures and foresight within academic disciplines of political science and international relations.

What’s Next:
COVID-19 both is and is not a black swan (and that’s ok): Futures within and beyond a time of crisis

We Were Warned
This was the title for a March 18, 2020 article in The Atlantic outlining the many and varied warnings about the “next plague” put forward by numerous analysts, futurists, government agencies, journalists, public intellectuals, and researchers (Alexander 2020; Gates 2015; Yong 2018).1 Friedman’s piece focuses squarely on the United States and its responsiveness capacity for such an outbreak, which, as the article notes, was intentionally dismantled in recent years. Why any government would intentionally weaken its capacity for responding to such a crisis might come as more than curious given the aforementioned warnings, say nothing of the recent anniversary of the Spanish Flu, but with regards to the crises facing the United States, of which there are many, the thin line between comedy and tragedy becomes most apparent when one considers an October 2019 simulation run by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (Brannen and Hicks 2020). With an extremely prescient focus on the effects of a highly contagious novel coronavirus, this exercise raised a number of critical areas of concern: the need for early action, diminishing trust in institutions, and the need for meaningful international cooperation. None of these, say nothing of the “pandemic playbook” left by the Obama Administration, were taken into consideration (Knight 2020).

Few individuals have been as outspoken about the catastrophic risks associated with a pandemic than Bill Gates, whose foundation works extensively on public health issues. In a TED talk, which has been viewed over 28 million times on YouTube, Gates highlighted the imminent and existential threat of “not missiles, but microbes” (Gates 2015). In spite of the many and varied presentations, reports, scenarios, simulations, and workshops focused on the next outbreak, none of these prognostications predicted “the” future. This is not, however, an indictment of futures (herein used as an umbrella term for futures studies, strategic foresight, anticipation, etc.). Quite the contrary: the lack of ability for futures to “predict” is not a bug but rather its most prominent feature. While there continues to be a great deal of uncertainty, particularly concerning the many crises spurred by the pandemic, one thing has become
crystal clear: futures does work. But, not in the way that some, if not many, want or think it should.

Futures (again, broadly defined) approaches and practices succeeded in helping many people think through some potential effects, engage with and navigate the uncertainties inherent to an exceedingly complex crisis, and create critical and creative learning for how one might enable certain futures and disable others. This last point is especially evident in contexts where early action and mitigation measures were implemented. Take Taiwan, whose pandemic response plan boasted 124 unique action items (Aspinwall 2020). Learning lessons from the 2002–2004 SARS outbreak, the Taiwanese government created a National Health Command Center, which was tasked with leading responses by coordinating communication and action between local, regional, and central authorities (Wang et al. 2020). Interestingly, a 2015 European Commission analysis of lessons for policy-makers pointed out that while there have only been a few foresight activities linked directly to policy-making in Taiwan, the more than two-decade history of teaching futures at Tamkang University, which was integral in organizing the Asia-Pacific Futures Network, has led to an “infiltration” of futures at a systemic level (Cuhls 2015). Correlation is not the same as causation, and there is another “c” word worth considering: culture. The case of Taiwan emphasizes the critical importance of diffusing futures as a capacity/capability within government and beyond, which is to say that for futures to have an impact, it must become an aspect of culture itself. Emphasizing perspective (Taiwan as an island) and context (proximity to high-risk outbreak areas), Taiwan forged a forward-looking culture who took the necessary steps to prepare for what might lie ahead. Furthermore, Taiwan’s pandemic response highlights the importance of hindsight, learning lessons from the past, which raises a question: what learning will be passed forward from our current crisis?

If one learning gets passed forward, it must be that the world is not beholden to our imaginings of it, whether historical, contemporary, and/or speculative. In spite of a novel coronavirus-driven outbreak being widely anticipated, futures ought (and must) continue to refrain from positioning itself as a “predictive science,” which has long been pointed out and continues to be a foolhardy enterprise (Slaughter 1998). From spotting emerging issues to mapping trends and challenging assumptions to illuminating blindspots, futures is ultimately a learning process by which we come to realize that we do not and cannot have control over “the” future. Taking this point further, and as enshrined within Dator’s “Laws” of the Future, it is still very much the case that “the” future does not exist, which is why exploring alternative futures is an absolute necessity (Dator et al. 2015). And, rather than condemning us to ignorance, this contention contains a truth bathed in hope. Were “the” future to exist, then it would be something beyond our ability to shape; our future would be a mere inevitability. If one operates from the assumption that “the” future does not exist, then agency to take action and shape the future is not only possible; it becomes a constitutive aspect of our humanity, especially within a time of crisis.

Both/And

During the early days of the pandemic, a question began to circulate across numerous social media profiles: was the COVID-19 pandemic a black swan? In early March, the influential venture capital firm, Sequoia, sent out a note, which was later published publicly, entitled “Coronavirus: The Black Swan of 2020.” Outlining a few of the probable, but also cascading, effects of the pandemic, Sequoia likened the pandemic to the 2008 Financial Crisis but also encouraged its Silicon Valley–minded partners to “Stay healthy, keep your company healthy, and put a dent in the world” (Sequoia 2020). As the outbreak bloomed into a full blown pandemic, many, if not most, futurists were quick to point out that the coronavirus pandemic was “not” a black swan. Given the aforementioned warnings, reports, simulations, and various other engagements
aimed at anticipating just such an event, the pandemic did not put a (conceptual) dent in the world, especially when one considers the ongoing and growing impacts of our collective climate emergency. However, amongst the global futures community (again, broadly defined), an uneasy consensus began to emerge. Even Taleb, whose namesake book arguably catapulted the metaphor to widespread recognition, delivered a verdict: COVID-19 was indeed “not” a black swan (Avishai 2020).

Although Taleb’s definition of what constitutes a black swan has changed over time, which has led to the advent of gray and even, more recently, “white” swans, the black swan metaphor remains the most popular metaphorical marker (Taleb 2007). Black swans, according to Taleb, have three core attributes:

- Must be considered an outlier.
- Must have an extreme impact.
- Must be retrospectively predictable.

One of the main challenges of the black swan metaphor has to do with the ease with which it is invoked. Indeed, “black swan” has become an all-too-common placeholder for any and all surprises, which is to say that Taleb’s somewhat technical three-part definition does not always get referenced. Another challenge in using this metaphor as a universal construct is that Taleb’s criteria are provided independent of perspective and context, which is to say that the simple question “for whom?” not merely complicates using the black swan metaphor; it explodes the binary thinking underlying such a question. Explicitly, the question is premised on the false assumption that everyone not only sees the same thing but sees it in the same way. Rather, the question “for whom might Covid19 be a black swan?” opens up a space to explore the complexities and contextualities of a global event from a variety of perspectives while paying attention to the role and importance of context. Implicitly, the either/or question positions, even if indirectly, futures as an activity centered on predicting/forecasting “the” future, which is certainly not the case. And, perhaps more importantly, this is not the conversation that futurists should want to have, drive, and/or promote.

As the title for this piece suggests, I propose a both/and position in order to counter the assumptions underlying the question itself, which is an approach inherent to Narrative Foresight. A brief reflection on the particulars of this approach is merited as Narrative Foresight has developed into a robust area of futures research and practice that blends “empirical, interpretive, critical, and action learning modes” (Milojević and Inayatullah 2015, 152). As a hybridized and, perhaps most importantly, living pedagogy, Narrative Foresight not only deepens the ways with which futures can and might be analyzed, created, and envisioned; but it also facilitates critical and creative thinking for framing and reframing both alternative and even preferred futures.

The critical importance of story as a means not only to frame but also reframe is actually something that Taleb himself noted in the prologue of The Black Swan: the impact of the highly improbable, although the book takes on the “narrative fallacy” head on and lambasts the power of storytelling. In a passage worth quoting in full, He confesses:

The philosopher Edna Ullmann-Margalit detected an inconsistency in this book and asked me to justify the use of the precise metaphor of a Black Swan to describe the unknown, the abstract, and imprecise uncertain—white ravens, pink elephants, or evaporating denizens of a remote planet orbiting Tau Ceti. Indeed, she caught me red handed. There is a contradiction; this book is a story, and I prefer to use stories and vignettes to illustrate our gullibility about stories and our preference for the dangerous compression of narratives. You need a story to displace a story. Metaphors and stories are far more potent (alas) than ideas; they are also easier to remember and more fun to read. If I have to go after what I call the narrative disciplines, my best tool is a narrative. Ideas come and go, stories stay (2007, xxvii).

Taleb fails to divine a critical insight delivered by Narrative Foresight: “narratives of
the future can also be used to disrupt these attempts to colonize through surfacing problematic assumptions in order to explore alternative scenarios and then move toward preferred futures” (Milojević and Inayatullah 2015, 160). This is perhaps the greatest point of derivation between Narrative Foresight and Taleb, although the latter shares the former’s disdain for prediction and all it assumes/entails. If one calls the very question (was the coronavirus pandemic a black swan?) into question through a Narrative Foresight lens, then the contention that COVID-19 both is and is not a black swan becomes the most reasonable, rigorous, and responsible point of view. Let me explain.

**Reasonable, Responsible, and Rigorous**

A *both/and* point of view is *reasonable* in the sense that it is quite unreasonable to universalize a single metaphor without taking into account perspective and context. Metaphors are not immutable Platonic forms but, as noted above, meaning-giving and sense-making lenses from which to reflect and see anew. Given that the story behind the black swan metaphor is itself a lesson in the importance of perspective and the natural limits of our contextual awareness, it is reasonable to suggest that all metaphors have inherent limits, not in what they might help us *imagine* but rather in how they might help us *define*. Reflecting on the metaphors we use to frame and reframe should instill an abiding sense of hubris for the language employed to make sense of complex phenomena as well as possibilities for what might lie ahead. One of the key aspects of futures/foresight work is to call into question what is obvious (normal as well, and more on that below), to test the limits of what is (and is not) reasonable, and to widen one’s scope of awareness such that one considers a greater range of potentialities.

A *both/and* point of view is rigorous in that it allows, daresay demands, for a more complex, and arguably more useful, framing of the pandemic and its cascading effects. The process by which come to understand possibilities for the future(s)—whether we are scoping out an area/sector/issue to explore or engaging in the practice of horizon scanning—is one that requires us to engage not just with a single trend or emerging issue but rather to consider how possibilities and potentialities are embedded within a variety of systems and influenced by a range of factors and forces. As such, it is essential not just to “see” something but to understand how one “sees” it, which is why multiple metaphors are useful to frame and reframe trajectories for phenomena to mutate as well as reorient our perceptions about such phenomena. This has led some, myself included, to employ and ultimately support a “menagerie” approach to framing both trends and emerging issues (Sardar and Sweeney 2016). Situating the pandemic as a black swan, grey rhino, black elephant, black dog, and/or black jellyfish has nothing to do with “getting it right” but rather generating further insights by taking on and conceptualizing possibilities through divergent perspectives (Wucker 2016; Camacho 2018; Serra del Pino et al. 2020). Indeed, one person’s black swan can and might be another’s gray swan, and vice versa. Conceptual framings and reframings that enliven, rather than collapse, possibilities by emphasizing perspective and context is a means to enhance the rigor with which futures, both alternative and preferred, are imagined, which is essential during a time of crisis.

A *both/and* point of view is responsible in the sense that futurists must do all they can to keep the future(s) plural, even and perhaps especially during times of crisis. Perhaps the futures field has become too beholden to the black swan metaphor. This is not to say that the metaphor itself does not have value, but the repeated and widespread invocation of it during the early days of the pandemic points toward what Riel Miller calls the “poverty of the imagination” (Miller 2018). Perhaps the most impoverished, if not irresponsible, imaginings for what might lie ahead are those seeking for things to go back to “normal,” which many have noted was part, if not the whole, of the problem (Lichfield 2020; Roy 2020). As such,
those engaging in futures work must take on the responsibility of imagining truly alternative futures, including and especially those that delve into the complex potentialities emanating from our all-too-postnormal times.

Encapsulating this contention and highlighting the impoverishing contagion that infects imaginings of the future, Dator argues, “Declarations about The Future are full of references to ‘most likely futures,’ ‘least likely futures,’ ‘probable futures,’ ‘worst case scenarios,’ ‘wild cards,’ ‘black swans,’ and a myriad of other metaphors, all of which are based on the assumption that there is a ‘normal future’ compared to which all other futures are deviations” (Dator 2016). A both/and point of view do not make Dator’s contention that there is “no normal future” any less terrifying, or stupefying for that matter, for those yearning for the familiarities of our pre-pandemic world. But, it does provide a means to imagine futures within and beyond a time of crisis that are not beholden to the conditions and currents that facilitated and accelerated the COVID-19 pandemic as well as its accompanying impacts and implications, and that is ok.

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Note
1. An early version of this essay was published on Medium in March 2020, and an amended version of this will be published in the forthcoming monograph: Infectious Futures: Reflections, Visions, and Worlds through and beyond Covid-19.

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