The Emmett Institute is bursting with pride today that our former fellow Holly Jean Buck, now Associate Professor of Environment and Sustainability at the University of Buffalo, has just been awarded a 2026 MacArthur Fellowship. The MacArthur Fellowships, informally known as the “genius awards,” recognize exceptionally creative people to enable them to pursue their work with no restrictions.

I cannot imagine a more ideal candidate for this honor than Holly. She is an exceptionally independent, creative, and original thinker; a highly productive and

skilled researcher; and a dedicated builder of bridges across disciplines, professions, and cultural and social settings. She is one of the most important and original thinkers on the societal implications and governance of climate and earth system interventions, but her broad-ranging curiosity covers all the societal aspects of climate disruptions and responses – emissions cuts, adaptation, greenhouse-gas removal, and interventions/geoengineering. Holly is also an honest and diligent scholar, who does the work to go where people are experiencing significant impacts of environmental or technological change and has the skills and humility to get people to talk openly with her and the insight to make sense of what she hears. And she enriches her work and makes it accessible by writing speculative fiction.

For all her contributions, in my view what makes Holly most remarkable is more about virtues than talents. She has a keen moral sense for the values at stake in the questions she pursues and a deep commitment to her work making people’s lives better. At the same time, she has a penetrating clarity of thought and unflinching intellectual honesty that does not let her deal in pious slogans, comfortable delusions, or outcome-driven magical thinking. This rigor and honesty have sometimes led to her being attacked – including by people who share her normative commitments, because she is not repeating received doctrine. This mix of virtues is sadly rare, but Holly is one of those rare cases. While she remains unfailingly courteous, respectful, and soft-spoken, doing this work requires real toughness and intellectual and moral courage. Contributions like hers are just going to grow more intensely needed, as the slow-motion heartbreak of climate change continues to unfold around us.

At the Emmett Institute, we had the good fortune to work with Holly from 2017 through 2020, when she held a series of fellowships jointly between the Emmett Institute and UCLA’s Institute of Environment and Sustainability (IOES). While here, she led several important projects, made major contributions to building what is now the Earth System Intervention Law and Policy Project, and played a leading role in convening the International Summer Institute on Geoengineering Governance, which we are now preparing to re-launch in 2027 after an 8-year hiatus.

Congratulations to Holly, and thanks for your fabulous contributions to the Emmett Institute.