



# EMMER GENT STRA TEGY

SHAPING CHANGE, CHANGING WORLDS

**adrienne maree brown**

# EMERGENT STRATEGY

Shaping Change, Changing Worlds

by adrienne maree brown



# DEDICATION

*I dedicate this book to the memory of Grace Lee Boggs,  
who opened the door to emergence and pushed me  
through, who taught me to keep listening and learning  
and having conversations. She said, “Transform yourself  
to transform the world.”*

*I dedicate this book also to the memory of Charity Hicks,  
who saw all the interconnected patterns as clear as day.  
She said, “Wage love.”*

# EPIGRAPH

“This may only be a dream of mine, but I think it can be made real.”  
—Ella Baker

# INTRODUCTION

First and foremost, thank you for opening this book. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I have enjoyed living, learning, and gathering it.

Wherever you are beginning this, take a deep breath and notice how you feel in your body, and how the world around you feels.

Take a breath for the day you have had so far.

And a breath for this precious moment, which cannot be recreated.

Now, another for the day and night coming.

Here you are, in the cycle between the past and the future, choosing to spend your miraculous time in the exploration of how humans, especially those seeking to grow liberation and justice, can learn from the world around us how to best collaborate, how to shape change.<sup>1</sup>

As I am gathering and writing this book, there is a trail of ants moving along the ceiling of my room, and the sounds of a small jungle town coming in and out of the screened open windows, birds cawing, laughter, children's delight emerging from that, then tears. A car backfires and I flinch, a lizard peeks at me from the door. It's been raining for a few days and the air feels thick.

I feel good, I've been meditating, picking up my yoga practice, biking the two miles to the beach when the sun comes out. Something is injured in my knee, but I am feeling alive against my limits.

I came to this edge of Mexico to pull a book together because, a few years ago, it was here, near this tiny portion of the massive ocean, that I began to realize how important emergent strategy, strategy for building complex patterns and systems of change through relatively small interactions, is to me—the potential scale of transformation that could come from movements intentionally practicing this adaptive, relational way of being, on our own and with others.

The waves drifting me towards and then away from the shore, seabirds of all kinds flocking over the salty blue, pelicans dropping down and scooping schools of tiny fish into their big mouths. Diving under the moving surface to see how everything humans leave in the water is repurposed as an ecosystem. Laying in a hammock and watching mosquito mamas approach me, wait for my attention to wander so they can feed on my blood.

I love the scene at the end of *The Matrix* where Neo sees everything in green-on-black code. Emergent strategy is a way that all of us can begin to

see the world in life-code—awakening us to the sacred systems of life all around us. Many of us have been and are becoming students of these systems of life, wondering if in fact we can unlock some crucial understanding about our own humanity if we pay closer attention to this place we are from, the bodies we are in.

The world is full of beauty, magic, miracles, and patterns that induce wonder. This book is a collection of essays, speeches, spells, interviews, conversations, tools, profiles, and poems sharing my learning processes in the face of that wonder. You are basically holding a book of me saying, “Wow, everything’s so amazing!” Or, “That’s not wow... Why not go with the wow option?”

Emergence is one of the best concepts I have learned for discussing this wow, this wonder. *“Emergence is the way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions.”*<sup>2</sup>

It is another way of speaking about the connective tissue of all that exists—the way, the Tao, the force, change, God/dess, life. Birds flocking, cells splitting, fungi whispering underground.

Emergence emphasizes critical connections over critical mass, building authentic relationships, listening with all the senses of the body and the mind.

With our human gift of reasoning, we have tried to control or overcome the emergent processes that are our own nature, the processes of the planet we live on, and the universe we call home. The result is crisis at each scale we are aware of, from our deepest inner moral sensibilities to the collective scale of climate and planetary health and beyond, to our species in relation to space and time.

The crisis is everywhere, massive massive massive.

And we are small.

But emergence notices the way small actions and connections create complex systems, patterns that become ecosystems and societies. Emergence is our inheritance as a part of this universe; it is how we change. Emergent strategy is how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for.

### *A few words on what this book is and is not*

I am offering this content as a cluster of thoughts in development, observations of existing patterns, and questions of how we apply the brilliance of the world around us to our efforts to coexist in and with this world as humans, particularly for those of us seeking to transform the crises

of our time, to turn our legacy towards harmony.

This book is for people who want to radically change the world.<sup>3</sup> To apply natural order and our love of life to the ways we create the next world. To tap into the most ancient systems and patterns for wisdom as we build tomorrow.

This book is not one that will teach you all about hard science, as I am not a scientist. As Octavia Butler said, “I would never have been a good scientist—my attention span was too short for that.”

My style is more “Ooh ah wow how??” than “Empirical data proves that...” I am writing this book primarily for other people like myself, who crinkle our brows and lean away when someone starts speaking math, who fall asleep almost immediately when attempting to read nonfiction, but who get spun into wonder about the natural world and want to know things, who feel and know more than we can say or explain, and want to know how knowing those things can transform the ways we approach changing the world.

I’m sure there are science people who could write a contrarian book to anything in here.<sup>4</sup> The natural world actually supports any worldview—competitive, powerless, isolationist, violent.

For instance, humans so far have generally deified and aligned with the “king” of the jungle or forest—lions, tigers, bears. And yet so many of these creatures, for all their isolated ferocity and alpha power, are going extinct. While a major cause of that extinction is our human impact, there is something to be said for adaptation, the adaptation of small, collaborative species. Roaches and ants and deer and fungi and bacteria and viruses and bamboo and eucalyptus and squirrels and vultures and mice and mosquitos and dandelions and so many other more collaborative life forms continue to proliferate, survive, grow. Sustain.

I want to understand how we humans do that—how we earn a place on this precious planet, get in the “right relationship” with it.<sup>5</sup> So I am focusing on the ways creatures and ecosystems function together in and with the natural world.

I am open to critiques of course, if they are offered in the spirit of collective liberation. Staying focused on our foundational miraculous nature is actually very hard work in our modern culture of deconstruction. We are socialized to see what is wrong, missing, off, to tear down the ideas of others and uplift our own. To a certain degree, our entire future may depend on learning to listen, listen without assumptions or defenses. So I am open to hearing what doesn’t work about this book, as long as you promise to stay open to what does work.



We all learn differently, and this book favors those who learn like me, through inspiration, through late-night conversations, personal revelations, experience, and reflection. I hope it will inspire and engage your interest in complex sciences, and in being of a miraculous world.

“Exercise your human mind as fully as possible, knowing it is only an exercise. Build beautiful artifacts, solve problems, explore the secrets of the physical universe, savor the input from all the senses, feel the joy and sorrow, the laughter, the empathy, compassion and tote the emotional memory in your travel bag.”  
—Ryan Power, *Waking Life*

This is not a book to displace all the strategic processes in play in social justice movements, or to discount the work that has happened up until now—there have been effective movements towards justice and liberation throughout the history of human existence—I am thrilled by how humans have continuously stood up against our own weaknesses. I think throughout history we have done our best given what we knew, and we will continue to do so. I also know that there are so many brilliant strategists out there who turn data into action and policy, and I respect that work. I see this offering as a noticing that can shape our next steps, as more water joining the river. And as a way to get aware of what we have learned so far, so that we can move forward from there, instead of repeating lessons we have already learned.

While my default position is wonder, I am not without critique, disappointment, frustration, and even depression when I contemplate humanity. Especially our social justice movements, where my expectations are (foolishly) higher. I promise to be honest about the ways that those aspects of personal movement crisis show up in my longing and searching for other ways of being.

Octavia Butler, one of the cornerstones of my awareness of emergent strategy, spoke of the fatal human flaw as a combination of hierarchy and intelligence.<sup>6</sup> We are brilliant at survival, but brutal at it. We tend to slip out of togetherness the way we slip out of the womb, bloody and messy and surprised to be alone. And clever—able to learn with our whole bodies the ways of this world.

My hope is that this content will deepen and soften that intelligence such that we can align our behavior, our structures and our movements with our visions of justice and liberation, and give those of us co-creating the future more options for working with each other and embodying the things we fight for—dignity, collective power, love, generative conflict, and community.

I will be satisfied if this book sparks conversations, new practices, and projects where people keep noticing, observing, and learning about emergence and liberation. If people see their experimental work affirmed by



this content. And if I hear of people's self and collective transformation journeys related to emergent strategy, whether people use that exact terminology or not. I hope it is part of our (r)evolutionary journey.

I hope that this book is clear enough that people feel free to play with all of these observations and their own, add to it, discard what doesn't serve, and keep innovating. I don't want to be the owner of this, just a joyful conduit.

Throughout the book I weave together thoughts and theories I have learned in the past decades of study and obsession with original content, tools, spells, poems, examples, lists, assessments—everything I can think of that could be helpful for those interested in this work.

As I was finishing the book it felt like it was missing something. I realized that it was because the way I have learned about emergent strategy is in conversation with others, so I asked a bunch of people I consider to be teachers in my life to get in conversation with me. And as their words poured in, in poems and quotes and stories and testimonials, all of a sudden the book became really alive and exciting to me. It also grew to nearly five-hundred pages. I slowed down and started weaving and listening. Now you get to hear from a variety of people who are doing emergent strategy work—in their own words, in hybrid interview/conversations, in love stories and moments of wow. Some of this content is in these pages, and some of it is on the Emergent Strategy Ideation Institute site.<sup>7</sup>

The book can be engaged nonlinearly! There is an assessment section, you can start there and let that determine where you dive in. You can just go straight to the tools at the end and start facilitating and experimenting with them. Or you can start with a review of the principles and elements of emergent strategy, which are in conversation with each other and can stand alone or cluster.

You can read the book with others, assess each other and assess the groups and circles you move in. Come up with new words and new observations for all of this, notice how it connects and echoes other theoretical frameworks. Underline everything that moves you and then give it to someone younger than you. Come up with workshops and retreats around this work. Take it, run, go, grow, innovate, emerge.

You can also just like the idea of this book. I often like an idea that I don't have time or attention to fully engage. I won't be mad! I believe we are all actually already aware of these things, we just have the volume turned down. May this serve as a turn up of our awareness of our place in the miraculous.

There are a million paths into the future, and many of them can be transformative for the whole.

journey were also teachers—Anasa Troutman, Kerri Kelly, Jenny Lee, Jodie Tonita, Jane S. Bai, Gibran Rivera, Mike N. , Jidan Koon, and Navina Khanna, and you.

I also held a transitional phone-based community of practice for a year after a Creative Change gathering in U.S. I had some very vulnerable and beautiful emergent elements that taught me about curating soil that is fertile for relationship building.

And then there are all the incredible people whose voices are woven throughout this book and whose appearance they each taught me something about emergent strategies. And there are many more teachers whose voices are not in this book.

I think that is the best I can do on explicit lines—feel free to remind me of anything I missed. Basically, I see emergence everywhere and I feel positively obsessed with the possibilities of being awake to it.

“Without positive obsession, there is nothing at all.”

—Octavia Butler<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I’ve developed my ideas of “shaping change” in conversation with Octavia Butler’s concept of “shaping God,” which is introduced in the Earthseed verses of her *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Nick Obolensky, *Complex Adaptive Leadership: Embracing Paradox and Uncertainty* (Burlington, VT: Gower, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> “Radical simply means ‘grasping things at the root.’”—Angela Davis, “Let Us All Rise Together” Address, Spelman College, reprinted in *Women, Culture and Politics* (New York, Random House, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> If that’s you, then yay! I bet you’re hella smart—help get us all free!

<sup>5</sup> “The mountains, streams, valleys, oceans, deserts, and all things are related to our thoughts and actions. All things are in relationship with each other.”—Jasmine Wallace, a Tsalagi (Cherokee) medicine woman, <https://certified.naturallygrown.org/producers/4166>.

<sup>6</sup> Octavia Butler, *Dawn* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> Emergent Strategy Ideation Institute’s website can be found at <http://www.alliedmedia.org/esii>.

<sup>8</sup> Hazif, *The Gift: Poems by Hafiz, the Great Sufi Master*, trans. Daniel Ladinsky (New York: Penguin Books, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Though I wrote this before the Queen released Her album, I would be pleased if you thought I was referencing the lyric “love god herself,” from “Don’t Hurt Yourself” on Beyoncé’s masterpiece *Lemonade* (2015).

<sup>10</sup> Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Janine M. Benyus, *Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> Kenny Bailey is one of the founders of the Design Studio for Innovation, a Boston-based artistic research and development outfit that serves civil society.

# INTENTIONAL ADAPTATION:

## how we change

**adaptation:** a change in a plant or animal that makes it better able to live in a particular place or situation; the process of changing to fit some purpose or situation: the process of adapting

**intention:** the thing that you plan to do or achieve: an aim or purpose

grounding in nature

“Starlings’ murmuration consists of a flock moving in synch with one another, engaging in clear, consistent communication and exhibiting collective leadership and deep, deep trust. Every individual bird focuses attention on their seven closest neighbors and thus manage a larger flock cohesiveness and synchronicity (at times upwards of over a million birds).”

—Sierra Pickett

“Water is versatile. It can be big and powerful, it can quench thirst, it can be healing, it can drown us. It finds its own level, always. That is, water is always seeking balance and has a place it has to go. It can be scarce, it is necessary. We’re utterly, devastatingly dependent on it. It’s beautiful and tragic and it feeds us sometimes. When we hold water back we can create power but there is danger when we remove the dam unexpectedly. It’s really flexible and adaptable. It takes the form of our containers. Bruce Lee says ‘Be like water...’ If we can understand fully the nature of water we can understand what we’re doing here.”

—Aisha Shillingford, *Intelligent Mischief*

“From water I have learned to move around and past fixed objects to reach my goal. From our winged kindred I have learned there are times to swarm and that such a swarm can take down even the largest and cockiest predator. But the most important lesson of all, for me, has been how history embeds in every living thing. The land speaks to me of a much longer time frame than the one my body understands. It reminds me that ours are generational fights that are passed down like legacy. The earth, in the way that it spins under our feet, changing while no one is looking, reminds me both that what we win today can be gone tomorrow, and what we lose today can be won tomorrow. The only constant is change. That is nature’s greatest lesson to me—that change is inevitable, and time is unfathomable. It means I can keep going, when all seems to fail and fall around me.

Nature is the source of my faith.”

—Malkia Cyril

“Humankind is still evolving, in a process which will never end. This evolution moves on changing principles which are known only to eternity. How can corrupt reasoning play with such an essence?”

—Frank Herbert, *Dune*<sup>51</sup>

“A victim of God may,  
Through learning adaptation,  
Become a partner of God.”

—Octavia Butler

**Intentional adaptation is the heart of emergent strategy.** How we live and grow and stay purposeful in the face of constant change actually does determine both the quality of our lives, and the impact that we can have when we move into action together.

Many of us respond to change with fear, or see it as a crisis.<sup>52</sup> Some of us anticipate change with an almost titillating sense of stress. We spend precious time thinking about what has changed that we didn't choose or can't control, and/or thinking ahead to future stress.

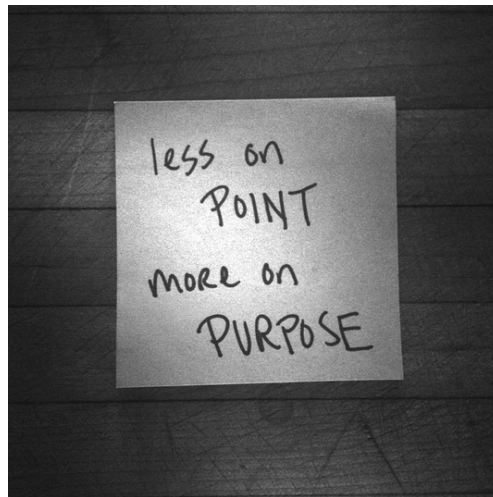
Often this is because we aren't clear or committed about our dream destination, so instead of moving towards anything in particular, we are in nonstop reaction. A first question to ask ourselves is, how do we practice increasing our ease with what is? Change happens. Change is definitely going to happen, no matter what we plan or expect or hope for or set in place. We will adapt to that change, or we will become irrelevant.

But this element is not about pure adaptation, which has led to every functional and dysfunctional condition we know. I am talking about the combination of adaptation with intention, wherein the orientation and movement towards life, towards longing, is made graceful in the act of adaptation. This is the process of changing while staying in touch with our deeper purpose and longing.

In movement work, I have been facilitating groups to shift from a culture of strategic planning to one of strategic intentions—what are our intentions, informed by our vision? What do we need to be and do to bring our vision to pass? How do we bring those intentions to life throughout every change, in every aspect of our work?

This often results in groups centering work that doesn't depend on factors outside of their control (such as funders, or elections, which come and go and should be well used but not directive or debilitating). The clearer you are as a group about where you're going, the more you can relax into collaborative innovation around how to get there. You can relax into decentralization, and you want to.

If the vision is only clear to one person, that person ends up trying to drive everyone towards their vision, or at minimum control how everyone gets to the vision. That makes sense, and it's so exhausting. Decentralized work requires more trust building on the front end, but ultimately it is easier, more fluid.



Most of the leaders I support in facilitation and coaching are suffering because they are not part of a group that can adapt together. They often express this as a lack of shared skills (“no one else is qualified to work with me”) or a lack of funding (“I can’t afford qualified staff people”), and those are definitely factors. But in the course of our work together we often find that the deeper problem is in the relationships between the members of the group.

My dream is a movement with such deep trust that we move as a murmuration, the way groups of starlings billow, dive, spin, dance collectively through the air—to avoid predators, and, it also seems, to pass time in the most beautiful way possible. When fish move in this way, they are shoaling. When bees and other insects move in this way, they are swarming. I love all the words for this activity.

Here’s how it works in a murmuration/shoal/swarm: each creature is tuned in to its neighbors, the creatures right around it in the formation. This might be the birds on either side, or the six fish in each direction. There is a right relationship, a right distance between them—too close and they crash, too far away and they can’t feel the micro-adaptations of the other bodies. Each creature is shifting direction, speed, and proximity based on the information of the other creatures’ bodies.

There is a deep trust in this: to lift because the birds around you are lifting, to live based on your collective real-time adaptations. In this way thousands of birds or fish or bees can move together, each empowered with basic rules and a vision to live. Imagine our movements cultivating this type of trust and depth with each other, having strategic flocking in our playbooks.

Adaptation reduces exhaustion. No one bears the burden alone of figuring out the next move and muscling towards it. There is an efficiency at play—is something not working? Stop. Change. If something is working, keep doing it

—learning and innovating as you go.

As an individual, developing your capacity for adaptation can mean assessing your default reactions to change, and whether those reactions create space for opportunity, possibility, and continuing to move towards your vision. I am not of the belief that everything happens for a reason—at least not a discernible one; it comforts me sometimes to know there is chaos, there is nonsense. But I believe that regardless of what happens, there is an opportunity to move with intention—towards growth, relationship, regeneration.

Now, as much as I fangirl for change, I still struggle when something that I have planned to be just so changes (did I mention that I am a Virgo oldest child with Aries rising and a Scorpio moon?). I fight until I am exhausted, and then I finally surrender to the inevitable.

I have been working on listening for the opportunity. Often this means I have to have a longer view—time is so good, so consistently illuminating. With time, the apparent crisis becomes a massive blessing. I know this has been true in my life of missed opportunities, heartbreak, organizational shifts, the deaths of loved ones who were miserably and terminally ill. The sooner I can look for the opportunity, the blessing, the more efficient I am in moving towards my vision. The energy it takes to resist and bemoan the change can instead fuel positive movement forward.

A few years ago I received an arts fellowship, which included a weekend of coaching and development,<sup>53</sup> and one of the core messages I left with that weekend is: What is easy is sustainable. Birds coast when they can.

As an individual, get really good at being intentional with where you put your energy, letting go as quickly as you can of things that aren't part of your visionary life's work. Then you can give your all, from a well-resourced place, when the storm comes, or for those last crucial miles.

“Nature has taught me that if humans don't figure out what revolution really means, nature will make the revolution despite us.”  
—Tawana Petty

This is All the Miracle (Accepting Towards Pleasure)

“I am letting go of pretending that I'm in control.”  
—Kavitha Rao

It is easy to think everything is a miracle during a moment of external joy—falling in love, welcoming new life into the world, celebrating a major accomplishment, seeing a wonder of the world, being part of a successful march or action...those moments when rightness flows through my body and

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- [51](#) If you have not read Frank Herbert’s sci-fi classic *Dune*, put this book down and go read it.
- [52](#) “Fear is the mind-killer”—get this reference? You should if you adhered to the previous footnote. Just saying.
- [53](#) I received the Kresge Literary Arts Fellowship, in Detroit, and the coaching and development was curated by Creative Many and Creative Capital.
- [54](#) This training was hosted by the group Intelligent Mischief, a creative design lab for social good.
- [55](#) Visit [www.movementgeneration.org](http://www.movementgeneration.org) to learn everything you need to know to live.
- [56](#) Notes from my facilitation debrief of the EDGE Funders gathering, April 2016.



# CREATING MORE POSSIBILITIES:

## how we move towards life

**Create:**

1. to cause to come into being, as something unique that would not naturally evolve or that is not made by ordinary processes.
2. to evolve from one's own thought or imagination, as a work of art or an invention.<sup>74</sup>

**Possible/possibility:** that may or can exist, happen, be done, be used, etc.<sup>75</sup>

**Wavicle:** an entity having characteristic properties of both waves and particles.<sup>76</sup>

The **multiverse** (or **meta-universe**) is the hypothetical set of finite and infinite possible universes, including the universe in which we live. Together, these universes comprise everything that exists: the entirety of space, time, matter, energy, and the physical laws and constants that describe them.

The various universes within the multiverse are called “parallel universes,” “other universes,” or “alternate universes.”<sup>77</sup>

grounding in nature

“From dead plant matter to nematodes to bacteria, never underestimate the cleverness of mushrooms to find new food!”

—Paul Stamets

“Last weekend I went on walk with my partner at the arboretum. There’s this little makeshift stream and all the trees along the stream had their roots in the stream. It just makes me think of how that happened and how long it would have taken for the roots to reach there and how that tree had to survive before it reached the stream. This helps me think about how, when we feel limitation, this is when we figure out how infinite our possibilities for us to grow out, around, thru to reach abundance.”

—Chrislene DeJean

“I’ve learned to trust nature. If she can make my weirdo, genderqueer, capable self, she can make anything. Nature helps me reimagine and reform justice and hope like the ocean reimagines and reforms itself when it washes back in from sand/mountains, faucets.”

—Jay-Marie Hill

“The plant people have taught me to be generous and not be shy about blossoming, that it is our nature. I think when others see us, it can inspire them to open up and blossom too

and we can be a field ablaze with dignity and beauty together.”  
—Brenda Salgado

Biodiversity is a beauty of the natural world, the variety of life. Whether you take the planet as a whole, or the ecosystems at a smaller scale—a forest, a pond, a puddle—life is constantly creating options. In our best human practices, we watch the systems of the world and follow them—permaculture. The natural world manifests life in ecosystems, not monocultures. One of my favorite ways of understanding nature creating more possibilities, is to watch water move through the world. Water creates the ways for itself, moving with gravity, moving around obstacles, wearing down obstacles, reshaping the world. When there isn’t an overt way forward, water seeps into the land, becomes a vapor in the sky, freezes into ice. When the time comes, water moves over the land in cloud form and nourishes elsewhere. And, of course, we humans are mostly water. And look how many ways we manifest.

“I’ve always been drawn to the water: oceans, lakes, rivers. In recent years, I’ve come to recognize how this deep, spiritual connection to the water energy connects me to the rhythms of our planet and our peoples—it is a necessary form of healing. Living cradled in between the mighty Mississippi and the beautiful Gulf of Mexico, their water strength provides me constant nourishment. I’ve learned from this that my organizing practice must include healing, as nature’s energy is one we can always tap into when we feel depleted or overwhelmed. Sometimes tides are high, and sometimes tides are low, but the waters remain in balance. And so can we. For me, to stay in the struggle for the long haul and keep going for another twenty years, this is critical.”  
—Jayeeshia Dutta

“I am a priest of Yemoja—the ocean is sacred to me. It’s my place of worship, of home, of grounding. If I am drowning in my own stuff, because of the relationship I have with Yemoja, she reminds me that my salvation is in moving the way she moves. The ocean doesn’t stop moving—it moves in different ways, with different levels of intensity—Coney Island looks one way, the Indian Ocean moves another more ferocious way, it’s still all the ocean. Yemoja reminds me to not get caught up with this external calendar of production, or get caught up with the idea that visibility is the same as doing the work. When I am flowing and can hear that small but powerful voice say ‘yes,’ I feel a complete sense of calm, I know I am heading in the right direction.”  
—Joan Morgan

“If Mama Nature teaches us nothing else, she teaches us that diversity is absolutely necessary for survival. Now, she doesn’t mean some surface diversity, but a system where every single being is doing their part, pulling their weight. A homogenous, ‘gentrified’ eco-system would quickly die. If we are committed to organizing sustainable and liberating social movements they must be diverse, pulling especially from those who are the most impacted instead of suppressing their voices or using them as props.”  
—Nia Eshu Robinson

“The world we want is one where many worlds fit.”  
—Zapatistas

“When forced into a binary, you always choose wrong.”  
—Jelani Wilson

**Creating more possibilities is my favorite aspect of emergent strategy—**  
this is where we shape tomorrow towards abundance. Creating more possibilities counters the very foundational assumptions about strategy.

The word “strategy” is a military term, which means *a* plan of action towards *a* goal. I want to really emphasize the “a”s in that sentence—there is a practice of narrowing down, identifying one path forward, one strategy, one way, one agenda, one leader, one set of values, etc. Reducing the wild and wonderful world into one thing that we can grasp, handle, hold onto, and advance.

We do this in movement all the time. I have been in countless meetings where there was a moment of creative abundance and energy, and then someone said we needed to pick one thing to get behind, or a three- or five- or ten-point plan. What came next was sometimes very compelling and visionary. Other times—often times—it was reductionist, agreeing on the lowest common denominator, the least exciting thing, because that was the only place there was unity. There was often a general sense of dissatisfaction and collective shrugging into this unity that was not invigorating. Authentic, exciting unity takes time, and lots of experimenting.

The other tragedy of this quick narrowing is that people get left out, not just in a slightly hurtful way, but left out of how we construct every aspect of society, infrastructure and culture. We come up with incredible plans that don’t account for crucial segments of our communities—I’ve witnessed this as well, unity that entails leaving behind people with disabilities; or trans, Indigenous, immigrant communities, and others.

It isn’t that we never need sharp, directed, focused and even single-issue moments—we absolutely do. It’s just that we live in a system that thrives when conditions are abundant and diverse, in a universe that holds contradictions and multitudes, and we often reject that chaotic fertile reality too soon, as if we can’t tolerate the scale of our own collective brilliance.

In my observations of the natural world, there are examples of scale that offer another way—when we think about snowflakes, grains of sand, waves in water, stars—there is evidence that many possibilities exist for how we manifest inside our potential. Then there are wavicles—entities that are simultaneously waves and particles. Then there is quantum mechanics, which examines the smallest units of our universe and shows that everything we think of as solid and singular is actually fluid and multitudes.

Excerpt from “Notes Toward a Theory of Quantum Blackness”<sup>78</sup>

By Sofia Samatar

## 2. Infinities

Blackness cannot be integrated with quantum mechanics at very high energies. At

lower energies, it is ignored; to address energies at or higher than the Planck scale, a new theory of quantum Blackness is required.

To address vulnerability. To address a relationship to interruption. To integrate the vibration of urban backyards.

Blackness has been described as nonrenormalizable. Its behavior depends on an infinite number of independent parameters. Therefore, to develop a consistent theory of quantum Blackness one must conduct an infinite number of experiments.

The experiment of zones. Analysis of prison-flesh attraction. The experiment of the “Black smile.” Of the child.

Infinite kinship experiments. Infinite gestures.

A laboratory vast enough to contain the wall.

Sometimes we were so tired we couldn’t lie down. We would take walks. We would buy nothings. We joked about the experiment of the corner store. The experiment of the fiercely freezing, neon-colored drinks. Of the red powder on the fingers. Fluorescent light.

Take into consideration the presence of a curved background.

Consider imaginary time. Noncommunicative geometry. The “trapped surface.”

Consider the implications of the phrase: “cannot be integrated.”

Consider string theory, which introduced the concept of vibration.

Experiments in exhaustion. Consider that the problem of quantum Blackness will mean different things to different researchers. My colleague died of complications from a condition called “hood disease,” but she herself always referred to it as “white supremacy disease.”

It is possible that the Black force particle does not exist: that the effects we observe derive from a different mechanism.

As my colleague wrote before her untimely death: Only two words in this research have meaning, and they are not [Quantum] [Blackness]

At the human scale, in order to create a world that works for more people, for more life, we have to collaborate on the process of dreaming and visioning and implementing that world. We have to recognize that a multitude of realities have, do, and will exist.

Collaborative Ideation is a way to get into this—ideation is the process of birthing new ideas, and the practice of collaborative ideation is about sharing that process as early as possible. This is not to say there is no space for individual creation—I love the selfishness of closing the world out and unleashing the realm of my imagination and creativity. But how do we disrupt the constant individualism of creation when it comes to society, our shared planet, our resources?

The more people who cocreate the future, the more people whose concerns will be addressed from the foundational level in this world.

Meaningful collaboration both relies on and deepens relationship—the stronger the bond between the people or groups in collaboration, the more possibility you can hold. In beginning this work, notice who you feel drawn to, and where you find ease. And notice who challenges you, who makes the edges of your ideas grow or fortify. I find that my best work has happened during my most challenging collaborations, because there are actual differences that are converging and creating more space, ways forward that serve more than one worldview.

“As a part of our liberation, the Earth teaches us that everything—E-V-E-R-Y-T-H-I-N-G—is connected. The soil needs rain, organic matter, air, worms and life in order to do what it needs to do to give and receive life. Each element is an essential component.

“Organizing takes humility and selflessness and patience and rhythm while our ultimate goal of liberation will take many expert components. Some of us build and fight for land, healthy bodies, healthy relationships, clean air, water, homes, safety, dignity, and humanizing education. Others of us fight for food and political prisoners and abolition and environmental justice. Our work is intersectional and multifaceted. Nature teaches us that our work has to be nuanced and steadfast. And more than anything, that we need each other—at our highest natural glory—in order to get free.”

—Dara Cooper

That is how *Octavia’s Brood* came to exist, because Walidah and I have radically different visions and work styles—Walidah pays attention to values-alignment in every detail. I skim, focused on patterns and magic.

I’ve worked with Invincible Ill Weaver over many years and we identified early that where they are gloriously thorough, I am fast and efficient. Where they seek research, how things happened in the past and lessons to apply forward—building a case—I feel things, mostly finding my attention on the present and future.

Projects with both of these collaborators have been able to accommodate tons of perspectives and mobilized lots of other creative work, in part because of the space between the collaborators at the core, and learning to communicate and ideate within that space.

Occupy and Black Lives Matter are two large-scale recent efforts that take this collaborative ideation to a movement level, proliferating futures from a place of possibility, of multitudinous paths forward towards a shared dream.

In our work for *Octavia’s Brood*, Walidah and I articulated that “all organizing is science fiction,” by which we mean that social justice work is about creating systems of justice and equity in the future, creating conditions that we have never experienced. That is a futurist focus, and the practices of collaboration and adaptation and transformative justice, are science fictional behavior. We didn’t create this understanding, we observed it amongst the afrofuturists and sci fi writers and creators we grew up loving and being liberated by. Language changes with time, and sometimes the word for a people or an action comes centuries late. But I want to always remember and honor those who stayed and stay future oriented in the face of oppression.

“There is nothing new under the sun, but there are new suns.”

—Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Trickster*<sup>29</sup>

## Afrofuturism and #Blackspring<sup>30</sup>

We tend to think and speak of afrofuturism as the far off future, something beyond our current comprehension and planet. But now is the only moment.

And we hope things will be different in the next now. And I must admit, I am excited about the near future.

What are we about to do after this winter of discontent?

We say, Black lives matter!

An afrofuturist assertion.

Because we see something other than the normative truths of this place... we see something that is not here...

We see the future, cast over this devastating present moment.

We see,

And we believe.

We know,

And we bend the world to assert and embody that Black lives matter.

That, to me, is the heart of afrofuturism, as I choose to understand it.<sup>81</sup> Labels don't excite me so much, but concepts turn me on. The concept of seeing and creating the future from a perspective that has the lineage of an African seed, of something older and other than western, feels healing to me.

We, of that displaced diasporic seed, who involuntarily reach back to the motherland in our dreams, have been scattered so far from each other.

And in spite of all the odds, we have been resilient.

I cannot speak emotionally about the journeys of the other seed clusters, though I am seeking stories all the time, reading Nnedi Okorafor and Ben Okri and Credo Mutwa and wanting to know more.

Lately I've been obsessing over the afrofuturism and justice orientation of slave-era Blacks, because our situation today feels so terrifying, and exhausting and sometimes hopeless, and there's so much trauma and grief to bear, and yet we survived that.

Not individually, but collectively.

Not all of those Black people were afrofuturists, but to focus on afrofuturists in the Black social-justice tradition, I would note that:

Africans leaping off of slaver ships were afrofuturists.

Slave-era parents teaching their babies a foreign alphabet in the candlelit dirt were afrofuturists.

Black women dissociating themselves through to tomorrow while being

raped into motherhood were afrofuturists.

Those who raised the children of violence, and those who chose not to, all were predicting the future and articulating their choices.

Slaves who ran to freedom, and slaves who ran to their deaths, were afrofuturists.

It is the emphasis on a tomorrow that centers the dignity of that seed, particularly in the face of extinction, that marks, for me, the afrofuturist.

And of course there are the big ones, whose names have made it through the erasers of history books, into our mouths—Harriet, Sojourner, Frederick, John, Malcolm, James, Ella, Martin, Nina, June, Toni.

Octavia.

Now it is our work, and the exciting thing about this time is that we are learning to name ourselves, our distinctions and solidarities. Our afrofuturisms. Developing enough of a common dream language that we can be that much more explicit about the real futures we are shaping into existence.

We are touching the future, reaching out across boundaries and post-apocalyptic conditions to touch each other, to call each other out as family, as beloveds. “All that you touch, you change. All that you change, changes you.”<sup>82</sup> we are making ourselves vulnerable enough to be changed, which will of course change what Black existence means. Octavia Butler, who gave us that philosophical spirit poem “Earthseed” that I just quoted, is a bridge for many of us, between this world, and the narratives that pull us through to the next realm, or the parallel universe, or the future in which we are the protagonists.

We are creating a world we have never seen. We are whispering it to each other cuddled in the dark, and we are screaming it at people who are so scared of it that they dress themselves in war regalia to turn and face us.

Because of our ancestors, because of us, and because of the children we are raising, there will be a future without police and prisons. Yes.

There will be a future without rape. Without harassment, and constant fear, and childhood sexual assault.

A future without war, hunger, violence. With abundance.

Where gender is a joyful spectrum. Where my nephew would not be bullied for his brilliant differentness. Where each of our bodies is treated like sacred ground, whether we have insurance or not.



Visionary fiction (a term that Walidah coined) includes sci fi, speculative fiction, fantasy, magical realism, myth, all of it. In addition to this intentional genreceid, visionary fiction intentionally explores how change happens from the bottom up,

How change works in collective ways, disrupting the single white male hero narrative,

Centering marginalized communities... Meaning we are the center of the story, as opposed to the sexy and unbelievably stylish sidekick. And visionary fiction is hard, and realistic, and hopeful. It's neither utopian nor dystopian, it's more like life.

Imagination is one of the spoils of colonization, which in many ways is claiming who gets to imagine the future for a given geography. Losing our imagination is a symptom of trauma. Reclaiming the right to dream the future, strengthening the muscle to imagine together as Black people, is a revolutionary decolonizing activity.

Some of the key practices that show up in Octavia Butler's work are collaboration, compassion, curiosity, romantic and sensual and non-possessive love, play, mediation, and the patience that comes from seeing ourselves in a much longer arc of time than we are encouraged to see in the instantaneous culture of the modern world.

What we are all really asking—what Octavia was asking—is how do we, who know the world needs to change, begin to practice being different? How do we have to be for justice to truly be transformative? Not them, that massive amorphous “them” that is also us, in our heads and hearts, or that loves us, or that is tired of this shit but is family to us... Not them, because maybe they don't recognize yet that these changes are the key to human survival. But *us*, us who are awake and awakening. How do we need to be for Black lives to matter? What do we need to heal in ourselves in order to offer a future of any real peace? Or to become the protagonists of this human story—and earn the flip of the page of all the sentient life in the universe? To claim the future as a compelling place for our miracles?

This is everything.

Science fiction is not fluffy stuff. Afrofuturism is not just the coolest look that ever existed. The future is not an escapist place to occupy. All of it is the inevitable result of what we do today, and the more we take it in our hands, imagine it as a place of justice and pleasure, the more the future knows we want it, and that we aren't letting go.

“Nature also teaches me persistence and perseverance, because in the end ‘nothing stops

nature.' If a rose can grow out of the concrete, then so can we."  
—Micah Hobbes Frazier

"I love bio-mimicry as a concept of human society learning from nature to make our lives better. In progressive arguments, we often point to examples in nature to prove our point.

What's ironic is that the left often discounts religion, but what makes the "it happens in nature" argument so powerful is this belief that nature is created by some higher being or a force beyond us. I think that is my attraction to nature. Its somehow proof of faith.

Something more powerful than us yet that we are apart of at the same time. The most powerful thing for organizers to have, I believe, is faith. This belief that we can win, that we can change the world, that we can all be better."

—Terry Marshall

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<sup>74</sup> Dictionary.com, <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/create>.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/possible>.

<sup>76</sup> Oxford Dictionaries, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/wavicle>.

<sup>77</sup> Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multiverse>.

<sup>78</sup> Sofia Samatar, "Notes Toward a Theory of Quantum Blackness," *Strange Horizons* 29 (February 29, 2016); with respect to the work of Black Quantum Futurism, <http://blackquantumfuturism.tumblr.com/>, reprinted with permission.

<sup>79</sup> This quote was shared by Gerry Canavan, the first researcher to go through the unpublished drafts of *The Parable of the Trickster* in the Huntington papers, via <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/theres-nothing-new-sun-new-suns-recovering-octavia-e-butlers-lost-parables#!>

<sup>80</sup> These are notes from my keynote speech at the Afrofuturism Conference, New School, New York City, 2015.

<sup>81</sup> In his essay "Black to the Future," Mark Dery defined Afrofuturism as "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th century technoculture." Read the essay at <https://thenewblack5324.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/mark-dery-black-to-the-future.pdf>.

<sup>82</sup> Butler, *Parable of the Sower*.