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Imaginactivism: Explorations of Science Fiction Feminisms’ Utopian Impulse and Reader/Writer Activism

~~In this chapter I discuss the entanglement of activism and cultural production in the work of three women that I claim as science fiction feminists: Starhawk, Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown. I would like to begin by thanking the Research Group Literatura and Utopia for inviting me to speak at MINUTO. In today’s talk, I draw I draw from my current European Commission Funded research project, but the project itself emerges from over twenty-five years research on and with feminist science fiction - research that has always been motivated by my own utopian investments. I have found the women and the work that I will talk about today discuss in this chapter deeply inspiring and with my research I want to share this inspiration with others. This is very much work in progress and I would welcome your feedback on how to communicate my research most effectively. What have I taken for granted that needs to be spelled out more explicitly? What points might I make more succinctly?~~

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~~You will note that I have changed the title of my talk slightly. In what follows, I will explain why I have made these changes. I begin by explaining the terms of my chapter title, first, I will begin by introducing the concept of imaginactivism. I then will suggest that explain why I think it is useful to we move from thinking of feminist science fiction to science fiction feminisms— with due acknowledgement to Katie King and Donna Haraway. Then I will talk about draw attention to the reader/writer nexus before discussing the inspiration and activism of three science fiction feminists; Starhawk, Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown.~~

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Since 2014, I have been working with the term ‘imaginactivism’ to conceptualise the ways in which interpretive and activist communities are formed, inspired and / or reinvigorated by fictional cultural production. For me, the concept of imaginactivism offers another way to think about and / or account for what I understand as the utopian impulse – the desire to move towards a concrete or everyday utopia (COOPER 2014) – and its expression. I coined the term strategically but, aptly enough, it does seem to capture people’s imaginations. I believe that those reading or hearing this neologism it encourages the reader to fill it with meaning and to try it on for size immediately try to make sense of it, wondering whether it is. Is it a descriptive noun, or ? Is it an injunction: —“Imagine Activism!”? The play of meanings available might Does its meaning lean more towards imagining or towards activism, but or does—this compound word is intended to usefully embody their entanglement; an entanglement that often

goes un(re)marked? ~~For me, the concept of imaginactivism offers another way to think about and / or account for what I understand as the utopian impulse – the desire to move towards a concrete or everyday utopia (COOPER 2014) – and its expression. The instantiated expressions of Imaginactivism~~ I focus on in my research ~~come fall~~ under the umbrella of science fiction feminisms, but the process relationship between imagining and activism obviously extends far beyond this realm.

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In ~~my~~ previous work on utopia, I have worked with the definition ‘struggle forever’ taken from Kim Stanley Robinson’s novel *Pacific Edge*, to convey the sense that utopia is something you do, not simply a static vision of an ideal state (in either sense ~~so~~ of the word), and imaginactivism is a coinage intended to do similar work. In *Pacific Edge*, utopia is characterised as: “the process of making a better world, the name for one path history can take, a dynamic, tumultuous, agonizing process, with no end. Struggle forever” (ROBINSON, 1995: 81). Both imaginactivism and this characterization of utopia are kin to Haraway’s use of ‘worlding’ which refers to the entangled processes of imagining/making worlds and being imagined/made up by worlds (HARAWAY 2013).

An alternative term to the utopian impulse or to utopia understood as process is necessary in part because ~~of the resistance to the language of utopia by~~ some of those whose projects I would regard as utopian because of their commitment to the possibility of social transformation find the language of utopia alienating. According to Ruth Levitas, “concrete utopia embodies what Bloch claims as the essential utopian function, that of simultaneously anticipating and effecting the future” (1997: 67), and many activists - and indeed, other science fiction feminists - work with this simultaneity of anticipation and effecting, but refuse the term utopian because of their perception that the term is about blueprints and a kind of perfectionism that is at odds with their open, provisional mode of experimenting with alternative forms of life to the dominant.

Imaginactivism is a compound word made up of Imagine and Activism, intended to connote the process relationship between imagining and acting to make change in the world. The coinage is intended to signal a positive and effective relationship between creating and sharing visions of a better world that is possible and being moved by those visions to take practical action. It suggests that we value imagining as the active process of crafting a vision that is the necessary accompaniment to worldly action; sharing it with and in a community of ideas. The temporality of that relationship might vary; our shared visions might emerge from the actions

we take, or they might co-emerge or be co-created, but the important point is that we don't regard the practice of imagining as simply escape or retreat from the world. I position my work on imaginactivism in the game of cat's cradle that Haraway has variously identified with "Science Studies, Feminist Theory, Cultural Studies" (1994) "Science Fiction, Speculative Fabulation" (2011) and other variants of what Katie King calls science fiction feminisms (HARAN and KING 2013). As Haraway notes: "The point is, in short, to make a difference — however modestly, however partially, however much without either narrative or scientific guarantees. In more innocent times, long ago, such a desire to be worldly was called activism. I prefer to call these desires and practices by the names of the entire, open array of feminist, multicultural, antiracist technoscience projects." (HARAWAY, 1994: 62).

Davina Cooper argues: "Everyday utopias don't focus on campaigning or advocacy. They don't place their energy on pressuring mainstream institutions to change, on winning votes, or on taking over dominant social structures. Rather they work by creating the change they wish to encounter, building and forging new ways of experiencing social and political life. Because their focus is on building alternatives to dominant practices, everyday utopias have faced both disregard and disdain from those on the left who judge this strategy to be misplaced. However, at a time of considerable pessimism and uncertainty among radicals about the character and accomplishment of wholesale change, what it entails, and how it can be brought about, interest has risen in the transformative potential of initiatives that pursue in a more open, partial, and contingent way, the building of another world." (COOPER ~~Date~~2014: 2)

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When we use the term feminist science fiction, it inevitably begs a number of questions, generally organised around some form of boundary management. Is it really science fiction, or is it speculative fiction, or is it just fantasy? Is it feminist because it's written by feminists, because it is about feminist issues, or just because it's written by a woman? And so on. Perhaps the term science fiction feminisms doesn't entirely escape the question of boundary management, but it pertains more to subject positions, to epistemology or even methodology. It is about seeing and making knowledge about the world through the lenses of both feminism and science fiction, so a science fiction feminism might - for example - explore the political economy and power dynamics of contemporary technoscience in ways that have been sensitised by reading both feminist theory and science fiction and / or from participation in feminist or science fiction communities. So although I'm interested in what texts that are labeled feminist science fiction have to offer, either as works of art, or as objects that do interesting cultural and

political work in their circulation, I also bring my science fiction feminism to bear on research projects that don't necessarily examine feminist science fiction texts at all.

For me, the everyday utopia of science fiction feminisms encompasses a wide range of projects and communities which are resolutely hopeful - at times even joyful - without giving up on the necessity of critique. However, the other world that is possible, or indeed the other world that already exists in the prefigurative politics embodied in the work of the key figures I discuss today, is what motivates and organizes their interventions rather than simply reaction to, or protest about the inequities and oppressions of the dominant culture. For example, Walidah Imarisha, one of the science fiction feminist reader/writers ~~about whom I will talk today~~discussed in this chapter campaigns for the release of specific individuals imprisoned in the US - including Mumia Abu-Jamal - people who she understands to be political prisoners wrongfully imprisoned by a racist and corrupt prison industrial complex, but her critique of this approach to 'crime and punishment' emerges from a much larger utopian vision of prison abolition and a society organised around transformative justice.

~~The original title of my talk suggested that I would talk about reader activism, but as I have already mentioned I'm going to focus on the work of three writers~~I use the term reader/writer activism in the title of this talk because I want to draw attention to the way in which writers contribute to genres of which they are readers and make interventions as part of a temporally and spatially extended conversation – and inspired by and inspiring temporally and spatially extended social movements – rather than *ex nihilo*. Taking as read - pun intended - the conceptual point made by literary theorists that in completing the work of the text all readers are writers, each of the writers that I'm going to talk about today is explicit about the inspiration they have drawn from reading feminist science fiction or the writing of science fiction feminists. All three, for example, prize the work of Ursula Le Guin, and of Marge Piercy, but their appreciation of these authors' work isn't limited to the texts explicitly understood as science fiction. Indeed it isn't linked purely to their appreciation of the texts but also to the political lives out of which these texts emerge. All three also work to move other readers to take up the work of reading actively, of writing and of doing the work that science fiction suggests is required to build better futures.

In my current research project, my initial intention was to focus on the work being done by Starhawk and an associated team of producers to adapt her 1993 novel for the screen. The

lengthy timescale involved in bringing such a project to fruition led me to add another case study to my investigation, that of the constellation of work around the publication and circulation of the short story collection *Octavia's Brood* (IMARISHA & BROWN, 2015).

Since 2011, Starhawk in collaboration with a number of different producers has been working on the project of bringing her novel *The Fifth Sacred Thing* to the screen (STARHAWK 1993). An ecofeminist novel that has remained continuously in print since 1993, *The Fifth Sacred Thing* imagines a future San Francisco that is a model of social, racial and environmental justice, and depicts the ways that the inhabitants of that city respond and resist non-violently when they are threatened by an invading army. This future society has developed an economic system based on the calorie in which everybody's labour is valued equally and there are no hierarchies-

I have elaborated some of the key themes of the novel because I want to draw connections with Starhawk's work as an activist. For many years, Starhawk was best known in the US and beyond as one of the co-founders of modern Goddess spirituality, but since the turn of the century a key focus of her work has been Earth Activist Training. Together with a changing cast of co-teachers, in Earth Activist Training, Starhawk combines teaching permaculture design certificate courses with a grounding in spirit and a focus on organizing and activism. I don't have ~~time today~~ space in this essay to discuss permaculture at any length, but suffice it to say that graduates of an Earth Activist Training Course emerge with a solid foundation in the skills that the imagined future inhabitants of San Francisco would require if they were to grow food in the streets and conserve and manage water, as well as experience of community-building through both ritual and communal labour. More poignantly, bearing in mind the events in Gaza earlier in May 2018, Starhawk has acted as a witness for peace in Palestine working with Palestinian and Israeli peace activists, as well as witnessing for peace in Nicaragua. The point I am labouring is that Starhawk is herself already engaged in, and has trained thousands of people in, the material and social technologies on which her imagined anti-oppressive future depends. In adapting her novel for the screen, she hopes to inspire a much wider audience to seek out these resources for themselves.

The Kickstarter campaign launched by Starhawk and co-producers to raise funds to enable them to pitch a movie adaptation of the novel to Hollywood backers was explicit that the producers' plan was to supplement the proposed screen adaptation with a website that would direct viewers towards those resources and that in addition that they wanted the eventual film to embody green values and social justice values. ~~As so~~ as writer and readers of *The Fifth*

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Sacred Thing their vision was of scaling up and speeding up the adoption of ways of living that they believe are better for people and the planet. As they said in their Kickstarter statement:

“They say that movies are collective dreams. If so, we’re heading for a nightmare—for there are very few films that show a positive future on earth. We want to change that. How can we create a thriving, just and balanced future if we can’t even imagine it? We want to bring alive a vision that can inspire people—and we’ve found the story in Starhawk’s novel, *The Fifth Sacred Thing*...

We want to be faithful to the values of earth-care and social justice the book represents. Not just in what the movie portrays, but also in the way we go about making it. We’ve written a Green Plan that will set new standards for environmental accountability in the film industry. We’ll bring resources into the inner city by networking with community organizations with whom we have longstanding relationships. We’ll put up a website with extensive resources and develop many ways that people who are inspired by the vision can learn the skills they need to create it and connect with others who share it. We want the movie to help nurture and support the movements that are already growing to put our world on a path of peace, justice and ecological harmony.

The original intention expressed in the Kickstarter campaign was to produce a feature film but in the process of pitching the project in Hollywood, it has become much more likely that the adaptation - should a production partner be found to provide the necessary financial backing - will be a serial drama made for television, perhaps for cable or perhaps for a streaming service.

~~I have spoken at this university before about what sparked my interest in this project. This was the launch of the Kickstarter campaign to raise the funds to put together the pitch package which Starhawk *et al* were then going to shop around to producers in Hollywood. I say Starhawk *et al*, because although in 2011 she wasn’t the lead producer, that lead producer is no longer with the project while Starhawk continues to be involved. Since 2011, some co-producers have left the project, and others have joined in the long and uncertain process of screen adaptation.~~ But each of the producers who developed the Kickstarter campaign as well as the producers who have joined or replaced them later in the process was inspired to develop the novel for the screen because of some element that for them was utopian - whether that was around the way that sexuality was imagined as liberated, or the dismantling of white privilege, or the attention to repairing ecological damage, or indeed the complex intermingling of them all in this imagined future. The hope in launching a Kickstarter campaign was that many readers of *The Fifth Sacred*

Thing would feel similarly and therefore offer financial support. Their hopes were met as their funding goal of \$60,000 US was exceeded. \$76,327 was raised from 1431 backers. The smallest pledges were between \$1 and \$5 and the largest pledges - three of them - were for \$2500.

Some of the comments that I read on the Kickstarter website [in 2011](#) made me want to know more about whether the project's backers might already have been moved to activism by reading *The Fifth Sacred Thing*. Some of the comments posted on the Kickstarter webpages by backers of the project led me to suspect that this was likely. For example, [Monica Luasonne](#) was life-changing - the film will reach so many kindred spirits (and make the rest think about what's really happening in our world); I will be so happy to see it come to the big screen!" [Shevek-Another](#) wrote: "The story is wonderful. As an activist I have found it difficult to world that I want to live [in]. Star, I think that you have learned a lot since you wr[ote] this book. I don't think that you want to change the story, but maybe you could use what you have learned to even more fully elaborate the setting." [Elizabeth-Yet another](#) wrote: "*The Fifth* resonated so deeply with me, and it's scary to see some of the scarier parts coming true (sale of water, destroying the Earth for resources [fracking]). It's also heartening to see so many people trying to make a difference. I'm honoured to be one of them." I have since interviewed a [limited](#) of the Kickstarter backers and they have collectively been engaged in a range of the same practices as the protagonists in the novel. Interviewees included an environmental artist, a volunteer worker at an urban food forest, veterans of non-violent direct action and of intentional communities. Some had already embarked on seeking utopian alternatives to the status quo before they read the novel, while some were inspired by reading the novel to additional seeking and developing particular practices related to the novel's vision.

In the process of pitching *The Fifth Sacred Thing* to film producers, Starhawk et al were advised that it would be useful if they had a sequel set in the story world of *The Fifth Sacred Thing* so Starhawk spent several years working on *City of Refuge* and in 2015 launched another Kickstarter campaign to enable her to fund its publication. The publishers she approached claimed that there would be no market for a sequel published more than twenty years later than the original novel. Readers of *The Fifth Sacred Thing* proved the publishers wrong and \$79,090 was pledged by 1481 backers in just 27 days. Remarks posted online by backers of this project underline the sense that backers had of being part of a mutually supportive community and of the importance of cultural production for social activism. [Di-ReadOne](#) wrote: "The success of project does my heart good! Isn't it wonderful to know that nowadays we need not depend on the cowardly, bottom-line-driven Establishment to publish our work? A great many people are

proud of Starhawk's achievements and eager to read the sequel to "The Fifth Sacred Thing," and we've made that plain. Congratulations!" [Punya HeinzAnother](#) wrote: "Yay!! So utterly community support for this fabulous and magical project! It's amazing what we can create when we all come together! And so thrilled for Starhawk, who has inspired and continues to inspire so many of us! Blessed be!" [And Jo McKernanYet another](#) wrote: "The Fifth Sacred Thing is story. Have read it at least once a year for the past 18 yrs...usually in Autumn around Samhain ;) The Declaration of The Four Sacred Things is my creed and the characters are dear friends who touch my heart, move my Soul and spur me to right action. Have turned many others onto this powerful tale and am so very thrilled to support this project and read the sequel soon! Bright Blessings to you Starhawk and all the fans and beloveds in this community. Mitakuye Oyasin --Aho"

In discussing both Kickstarter projects as well as the two novels, I am interested in the iterative character of Imaginactivism or everyday utopias. The enrolment of an imagined utopian community isn't limited to the instantiations I've already mentioned. In 2016, Starhawk undertook a series of speaking engagements - largely on the West Coast of the USA - that at one level could be understood [simply](#) as a promotional book tour, as she discussed the themes of her new novel and attendees could purchase copies of both ~~it~~ *City of Refuge*; and *Fifth Sacred Thing* -following her talks. However, the talks were attended by a cross-section pagans, permaculturists, feminists and environmental activists and Starhawk talked about her fiction both in terms of the key questions that animated them and in relation to the social and political context in which they were written. For *The Fifth Sacred Thing* the question was about the use of non-violence as a response to violence and for *City of Refuge* it was about how people build a new society when they are profoundly damaged by the old one. These are questions that Starhawk thinks and writes about in relation to her analyses of power and social order, so she talked about her work in relation to pressing questions of social, racial and environmental justice and in relation to questions that audience members asked her about strategies for resisting or contesting the current social order. So, what might be understood crudely as a marketing strategy was also an invaluable service to communities feeling disheartened by the election of Trump, by fracking and oil pipelines being driven through Native Americans' lands or by the repeated violent attacks on black people in the US that led to the formation of Black Lives Matter. Starhawk also took the opportunity to talk about inspiring work that others were doing. For example in Portland, she could refer to the work of

her hosts, the *City Repair* Project. *City Repair* describe their work thus: “*City Repair* facilitates artistic and ecologically-oriented place-making through projects that honor the interconnection of human communities and the natural world. *City Repair* has accomplished many projects through a mostly volunteer staff and thousands of volunteer citizen activists. We provide support, resources, and opportunities to help diverse communities reclaim the culture, power, and joy that we all deserve.” Mark Lakeman, cofounder of *City Repair* is a graduate of one of Starhawk’s Earth Activist Training Courses, marking one node in the spiralling networks of activism and utopian inspiration in which Starhawk is entangled. By bringing an audience to hear Starhawk speak about her fiction and the political and social context of both its production and reception *City Repair* ~~is facilitating~~helped facilitate an of her fiction that enrolls her readers from the outset in reading that is entangled with activism in interesting ways. I’m not arguing that all readers of her fiction will immediately engage in social justice or environmental activism, but through her own activism, her non-fiction writing as well as her fiction and through the face-to-face presentation of her ideas, she is helping extend the possibilities for better futures that they can imagine.

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Starhawk, Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown all form nodes in intersecting networks of social activism in the US. One interesting point of intersection is through *the transformative justice sci-fi reader* - a pamphlet “written and prepared for the 2012 Allied Media Conference” - co-authored by adrienne maree brown, alexis pauline gumbs, leah lakshmi piepzna-samarasinha and jenna peters-golden (BROWN ET AL 2012). The conference has been held annually in Detroit since 2007 although the organisation’s history reaches further back. According to their website: “The Allied Media Conference is a collaboratively designed event curated with care every year by 100+ volunteer coordinators. Conference content explores the intersections of media and communications, art, technology, education, and social justice.” The conference has a focus on participatory media as a strategy for social justice organising so it is instructive to note the way that this group of authors interprets participation as a readerly strategy as well as a writerly one.

One of the chapters in the reader, written by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha is called “*Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Fifth Sacred Thing*: Two White, Feminist, Transformative Justice Utopias with Interesting Ideas and Also Problems”. In this chapter she returns to feminist utopian fictions that she read “as a kid”, because she says that they: “have shaped my

searching for alternate forms of justice with an appreciative eye and critical eye.” (BROWN ET AL, 2012, 22) Leah performs largely sympathetic readings of both novels but offers some specific points of criticism as well as noting that she like the books: “because they're realistic and imperfect models of dealing with sexual abuse and intimate violence without cops that are also hella concrete. They are also undoubtedly filtered through the white racial lenses of their authors. Both Piercy and Starhawk are white, Jewish ciswomen, one working-class, one middle-class, who write multiracial futures through the lens of their white feminism. This lens, and the ways they do and do not advance anti-racism, undoubtedly affects how they can imagine justice in the dream world to come.” (BROWN ET AL, 2012, 22) The biography on Lea’s website identifies her / them as a: “queer disabled nonbinary femme writer and cultural worker of Burger/ Tamil Sri Lankan and Irish/ Roma ascent (*sic*)” and notes that she is the lead artist with the disability justice performance collective Sins Invalid [with whom] she teaches, performs and lectures across North America. Her bio in Octavia’s Brood to which she also contributes adds: “She has organized around issues of transformative justice, disability justice, and radical teaching and learning for twenty years.” (IMARISHA & BROWN, 2015, 291)⁴ Obviously I’m not claiming a direct causal link between her reading of feminist utopian fiction and her activism, but the biographical note with which she begins the essay in the Transformative Justice Reader, plus the way that she breaks down the ways in which such texts are and are not successful in imagining transformative justice makes explicit the links between the work she has done as a reader and activist, and then adds in the additional loop of her opening up these possibilities to the reader that she writes for. In the same reader adrienne’s chapter is listed in the table of contents as “why *the dispossessed* is required reading”. She tells her readers: “part of the reason i read science fiction passionately, geekily, and studiously is because I want to learn how humans generate imagination and vision. i have been part of movements trying to improve the world my entire conscious life, and i have noticed that we have a massive deficit of imagination in that work.” She goes on:

we are skilled at critiquing, analyzing, deconstructing, memorizing, reiterating, complaining about and hating on *the system* (capitalism), the people who hold power in the system, those complicit in it, and, of course, ourselves. and these are important skills, in their place: they help us to share a whole complex picture, lay the foundation for strategy, vent . . . sometimes articulating the problems helps us to survive to work another day. but i have this longing for audacious visions and dreams that move us forward, that titillate and incite and guide us through and around and above the current

systems-[\(BROWN ET AL. 2012, 33\)](#).

She then performs a close reading of a section of *The Dispossessed* to demonstrate the ways in which Le Guin reimagines justice, but holds back from going into more detail about the novel instead enjoining her readers to read it themselves, and like Leah, she gives instructions for reading: “I want you to read this book with your whole heart and your curiosity, so i won't reveal more than this now. but read the novel as a love note, as an inspiration, as a specific set of guidelines for how to be differently-” [\(BROWN ET AL. 2012, 34\)](#). Having issued this injunction adrienne goes on to write a section about Octavia Butler and emergent strategy that isn't listed on the Reader's contents page. She explains the collective genesis of the work that she has recently published in book form as *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Shaping Worlds*: “for the past couple of years the allied media community has been building a shared analysis of butler's science fiction writing. we knew, through casual, late-night conversations, that her work was impacting us very seriously on a personal level—but we wanted to explore how we could apply her wisdom on the level of political organizing.” adrienne explains that some members of the same collective had also been “geeking out learning about emergence and other science theories that seemed to really capture the approaches we were using in our political work.” [\(BROWN ET AL. 2012, 34 -5\)](#). She suggests that the question they were seeking to explore was whether they could develop strategic minds rather than strategic plans and that Butler's work offered a language and a process to speak about doing work that is strategic because it accepts the emergent power of changing conditions.

Adrienne's co-editor of Octavia's Brood, Walidah Imarisha began to learn about politics and organising through an internship with Community Alliance of Lane County as a bright engaged teenager somewhat disaffected with her public school's curriculum. Round about the same time, Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* was her introduction to feminist science fiction. Walidah is grateful that that Piercy's novel was her introduction because it helped shape her politics. It gave her hope for a future that centres queer and trans people of colour with a lens of joy.

By the time she began working with adrienne maree brown on putting together the project that became the *Octavia's Brood* collection, they had each independently been using science fiction in their social justice organising for years. In fact both had offered workshops using science fiction at the 2010 US Social Forum - a space to come up with the peoples'

solutions to the economic and ecological crisis - in Detroit. Walidah's session worked with [the concept of](#) visionary fiction which she had been developing with another collaborator [Morrigan Phillips](#), and adrienne's had focused on emergent strategy. Following the event, adrienne contacted Walidah by email and asked her if she would like to work on co-editing a book and the collaboration took off from there. Walidah was based in Portland, Oregon, and adrienne in Detroit, Michigan, so their collaboration was mediated by email and Skype, while they were each supported in their activism and their vision for the project by their local communities and the more extended community of US social justice activists hailed by the US Social Forum and the Allied Media Conference. As a key organiser with both Allied Media Projects and the US Social Forum, adrienne was deeply involved with social movement-building following years of working with social change organisations. Her collaboration with Walidah capitalised on their common experience of movement work, their love of science fiction and their experience and expertise as writers and editors. Both veterans of multiple collaborations they appreciated the complementary strengths each brought to the table.

In the introduction to *Octavia's Brood*, a collection which is subtitled "Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements", Walidah writes: "Whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction. All organizing is science fiction. Organizers and activists dedicate their lives to creating and envisioning another world, or many other worlds—so what better venue for organizers to explore their work than science fiction stories? That is the premise behind the book you hold in your hands." [\(IMARISHA & BROWN, 2015, 3\)](#).² Despite these claims about science fiction and the book's subtitle, "Science fiction from social justice movements", Imarisha isn't satisfied with that term and explains that: "Visionary fiction' is a term we developed to distinguish science fiction that has relevance towards building new, freer worlds, from the mainstream strain of science fiction, which most often reinforces dominant narratives of power. Visionary fiction encompasses all of the fantastic, with the arc always bending toward justice." [\(IMARISHA & BROWN, 2015, 4\)](#).

She sets out the following principles for visionary fiction;

- Visionary fiction encompasses science fiction, fantasy, horror, magical realism, alternative timelines, and more. It is fantastical literature that helps us to understand existing power dynamics, and helps us imagine paths to creating more just futures
- It is realistic and hard, but hopeful
- Change comes from the bottom up, not the top down

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- Change is collective, communal, decentralized
- Change focuses on people and is relational;
- Change centers the leadership of those who have been marginalized, and centers the leadership of those who live at the intersections of identities and oppressions.

Contributors to the collections worked from these principles, and the *Octavia's Brood* team continue to deliver workshops introducing a wide variety of people invested in social justice to writing visionary fiction.

In this last section before I conclude, ~~I'm not going to speak about~~ I focus not on the content of the short stories, but about the process Walidah and adrienne developed to bring the book into being, and to use it as a platform for social justice work. Walidah and adrienne invited people in their organising networks to contribute short stories for their proposed anthology and workshopped the stories intensively with many going through multiple rounds of editing until the co-editors were confident that the authors had drawn out the full visionary potential of their stories. For a number of contributors this was their first time writing fiction but they were inspired by the co-editors' vision and commitment, and by the prospect of honouring Octavia Butler. They also planned to tour with the completed anthology – as well as in advance of its publication – giving readings and leading collective writing workshops as well as facilitating organizing strategy sessions that draw inspiration from science fiction. Having gathered the stories, like Starhawk, Walidah and adrienne turned to social media and crowdfunding through the Indiegogo platform to ensure that *Octavia's Brood* would come to be.

In introducing their campaign they said:

We are adrienne maree brown and Walidah Imarisha, two community organizers, educators, writers and self-proclaimed nerds. We have individually and collectively been working to bridge the visionary qualities of science/speculative fiction with radical community organizing practice.

We thought there was no better way to do this than with our current book project: *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*. It's an anthology of radical science and speculative fiction written by organizers and activists. (<https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/octavia-s-brood-science-fiction-stories-from-social-justice-movements#/>)

They published a gallery of videos setting out their vision, including interviews with many of the author contributors who explained what the project meant to them. For their 45 day campaign on Indiegogo, they set a goal of \$8277 and managed to raise \$17,349 from 550 backers. Despite their success in raising funds, the process was not plain sailing. In October 2014, some months after their planned date of publication on what would have been Octavia Butler's 67th birthday, Walidah Imarisha announced a change of process to Indiegogo backers;

In terms of publishing, our original intention was to self publish. As editors, we both knew it would be a massive amount of work but were committed to it. However, once we were immersed in the process, we found it was even more work than we could have imagined. It has turned out to be more than we actually have capacity to do on our own, especially as we move into the realm of distribution. We wanted above all else to ensure that Octavia's Brood is the highest quality anthology, to honor the loveliness that we as editors - as well all of the writers and everyone who donated and supported the project - have poured into it over the past four and a half years.

We have determined that going with an aligned publisher will allow us to actually focus more on the touring, workshops and sharing the work with all of you in ways that move beyond just book readings. (<https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/octavia-s-brood-science-fiction-stories-from-social-justice-movements#/updates/all>)

Imarisha and brown had set themselves a tall order of editing and publishing the books within a year of launching their Indiegogo campaign, but as they had announced in an earlier update in the social media platform, within the year they realised that despite their commitment to working intensively on the project it was impossible to deliver it in time. This was both due to their concern that it was produced to an appropriately high standard and to recognition of their own personal limits in terms of energy. That they communicated this transparently on the Indiegogo platform is testimony to their commitment to prefiguring a just world. The book was published by AK Press – a worker-run collective that publishes and distributes radical books, visual and audio media – in March 2015, with an incredibly striking cover design by John Jennings. They also, individually and collectively continue to deliver trainings with visionary fiction. I attended a 90 minute workshop led by Walidah Imarisha in Amsterdam in February and it was astonishing to see the creativity stimulated by these principles applied to visionary stories relating to host of pressing social and environmental issues. [In May 2018, when this](#)

~~paper was presented at MINUTO.~~ Walidah ~~is currently~~was in Zimbabwe ~~where she will be~~ workshops, demonstrating a little of the amazing reach that Octavia's Brood has had.

I want to conclude by clarifying what excites me about the work of Starhawk, Walidah and Adrienne. In a 2013 article, Moya Bailey says this about adrienne maree brown: "Brown is a patternmaster. She brings communities together through the thread of Octavia Butler's writing in collaborative sessions that emerge around the curated content of *her Octavia Butler Strategic Reader*:" (BAILEY, 2013, NO PAGE) This reader is a predecessor to the Transformative reader already mentioned. Starhawk and Walidah are also patternmasters, bringing communities together around science fiction and through their other work organising, facilitating and training that attends to social and environmental justice. They enrol readers, and writers, in their visions of transformed futures, AND they do the work of transforming futures through grounded everyday organising as leaders, participants and allies in social movement at multiple scales. The texts I've mentioned today – *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, *City of Refuge* and *Octavia's Brood* – entangle their readers in extended genealogies / communities of feminism, anti-racism, environmentalism, anarchism, science fiction and so on. The capacity of their authors to combine pragmatic, practical commitments to getting things done with visions of transformative justice as well as their ability to articulate the importance of that combination, evokes the utopian investments that many readers have always had in the potential of science fiction to change the world. More than that, they set their own utopian investments in the liberation of the imagination – and the capacity to communicate that liberation effectively through writing and reading – moving in an iterative process that draws their own experiences of effecting change through their writing and reading practices. Returning for a moment to the figure of the cat's cradle that Donna Haraway uses to think with, to be effective, the patterns that they form and the threads that they draw need to be picked up by other readers and writers – and activists – worked with, and passed on. I believe that they are particularly effective in their offering of the patterns to be picked up for a number of reasons:

- They write accessibly in multiple genres and on multiple platforms.
- They take every opportunity possible to speak in public about their political commitments and their creative work and to link them explicitly,
- They endeavour to share the skills of organising and of creative practice and to focus on the importance of collective imagining.

- They strive to embody the social, racial and environmental justice they envision through their daily practices and they make that work and struggle transparent in their public communication.
- By their example they encourage others in the fullest sense of that word that more is possible than they had previously imagined.

Their work is imaginactivism in play. They ask us to imagine activism, and to do so in using the principles of visionary fiction. They demonstrate in their work and in their lives the entanglement of imagination and activism, and offer us ways to use that entanglement self-consciously and strategically. They make a difference and they remind us that we can too, we are part of a widely-distributed collective that knows another world is possible.

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