

Meditations on a Politics of Futurity: A Black Feminist Repertoire for Worldbuilding

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Abstract This essay includes a political repertoire for thought and action rooted in Black feminism that I call a *politics of futurity*. It consists of four parts: purpose, strategy, tactics, and goal. The first builds on the politics of care that I developed in *Reckoning*. The second adapts and extends Saidiya Hartman's method of critical fabulation augmented by a notion of political fabrication. The third suggests tactics derived from the folkloric character of the Trickster. And the fourth forwards the goal of democratic redesign and reconstruction, which we can think of as worldbuilding.

Keywords Black feminist, social movements, futurity, worldbuilding, trickster politics, organizing

*All that you touch, you change.
All that you change, changes you.
The only lasting truth is change.*
—Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*

INTRODUCTION

On Futurity

We are familiar with the concept of “the future”—a singular, locatable, prospective point in time, which is assured to come as long as the seconds keep ticking past. Sometimes we even pluralize the word and speak of possible “futures”—an acknowledgment of the multiple possibilities that may obtain across the magnitude of time. However, future, in both its singular and plural denotations, can fail to speak to the ways that people can shape the conditions of its unfolding. Incorporating a sense of agency for “collective self-fashioning”¹ into our notions of the world to come—the world we are tasked to shape—is the subject of *futurity*.

Futurity is a disposition toward worldbuilding. It is the quality or state of being of or concerned with the prospects and possibilities of a future time, event, or renewed and continuing existence. It is an

approach, a perspective, and a framework for thought and action. It is agentic and efficacious, taking up Octavia Butler's observation and exhortation that "all successful life is adaptable, opportunistic, tenacious, interconnected, and fecund. Understand this. Use it."² This is especially so in times when conditions are unstable and outcomes, highly contingent. Futurity is the conviction that the part of the story one is living in is not and cannot be the whole of it, paired with the determination to affect the terms on which renewed and continuing existence will be experienced. In this paper, I offer a Black feminist repertoire for worldbuilding that can be useful toward a *politics of futurity*.

I offer this meditation because we are currently living at a critical juncture—a moment where a confluence of upheavals require us to reset the ideological and political terms on which the twenty-first century is lived. It is a moment of extreme danger and outsized opportunity. The path before us is in the making, for worse and for better. The myth of the "end of history" has dissolved. In its place there are myriad and often confused ruminations about what went wrong and how to make it right. The problem with many of these calls, from left, center, and right, is that they ask us to go back, to retread the political and theoretical ground of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and take a different side. However, what is special about this moment, precarious as it is—is that it gives us a rare political opportunity to *begin something new*.

Fortunately, the movements of the twenty-first century so far, particularly the Black Lives Matter movement, have provided us with a repertoire of political approaches, tactics, and vision to draw from and expand upon toward overturning the twentieth-century paradigms of what constitutes proper and reasonable ways to arrange our political, social, and economic lives. These ideas dwell within a striving but conflictual leftism, and are in competition with a nostalgic, scolding liberalism, and in opposition to a highly organized, fractious but bold right wing, which already believes it can remake the world and is taking robust action to do so.

Given these conditions, whatever political routines this century settles into, it will not be a return. There is no return. The question is only what future we will make? If we wish to have a chance for a future in which more people can "live and thrive," a common refrain in the Black Lives Matter movement, we will have to build it upon the conviction that human flourishing, which can be measured as widespread well-being, must be the commonly accepted end of politics.³

To build a world in which this could be so, we will have to look to different traditions for guidance and allow ourselves to entertain political processes, tactics, and goals that currently seem improbable but can

be made plausible through our efforts. It is for these reasons that I offer a Black feminist repertoire for worldbuilding. It is not the only possible repertoire toward futurity and indeed, I hope that this piece will serve as an invitation to codify many, plural repertoires, but in all cases, I believe we should look toward traditions that have been non-dominant and less-studied because they contain perspectives, approaches, and information that may give fresh perspective and inspire us toward institutional inventions that are less likely to reproduce the precarious circumstances we are now trying to overcome.

Borrowing from Charles Tilly and the literature on social movements, I call this collection of political methods toward futurity a *repertoire* to indicate that the activities herein are learned modes of political behavior that can serve as a stock, or reservoir for thought and action that can become familiar while remaining adaptable to peculiar circumstances and specific settings, as needed. We commonly speak of repertoires with reference to the arts — the collection of plays, dances, or material that a company is prepared to perform or display along with the skills and types of behavior that a person or group has learned. The ways of thinking about and undertaking political action that I detail as methods for worldbuilding should be thought of in the same vein.

Repertoires for worldbuilding aim to move beyond what Alexis Pauline Gumbs, referencing Audre Lorde's poem "A Litany for Survival," has called the "shoreline" of modernity. Gumbs writes that theorists and scholars, both inside and outside the academy, "are the purveyors of the horizon" who "know the truth of erosion and bet against it" through the creation of "theory, pedagogy, and lifetimes, not out of thin air but out of [the knowledge of] lines walked, impossible futures lived."⁴ In the tradition of Black feminist politics and drawing on critical Black diaspora studies and queer theory, Gumbs suggests our politics "must be[come] radically futurist because of the dire unacceptability of the present political situation."⁵ Gumbs is writing of the specific experience of Black queer people in the early 2000s, but by now we have all come to recognize the shoreline — the limit and boundary — where the world that was built in the twentieth century has run aground. It is this reality that is cause for a meditation on futurity, the goal of which is to open ourselves to a conversation about a sweeping democratic redesign and reconstruction. One that takes seriously the duty and task of pragmatically imagining the next century and building the parallel institutions that can shelter us as we make the road from here to there. To undertake this meditation is to begin the process of understanding ourselves — scholars and activists and ordinary denizens — as authors and doulas for the next age.

The following details a Black feminist repertoire for political thought and action with elements that correspond to the underlying

purpose of what I have called a “politics of care” — a component of radical Black feminist pragmatism; political *strategies* of storytelling and institution-building that I derive from Sadiya Hartman’s methodology of “critical fabulation;” *tactics* inspired by the figure of the folkloric Trickster; toward the *goal* of the democratic redesign⁶ and reconstruction, that I call worldbuilding. Together these elements of purpose, strategy, tactics, and goals are a framework for a politics of futurity. This first attempt at building out a political repertoire toward futurity is necessarily incomplete, but let me be clear: What I offer here is not a theory that is only aimed at Black futurity — though it is that; it is a theory of how we might build futures toward flourishing for each and all of us.

One final note before we embark: It is not out of a wild optimism that this project must be undertaken, but out of practical necessity and with the joyful ambition and urgency that we witness in our forebears at the turn of last century. The current living generations have a colossal task ahead, but not much more so than those who sat in our positions one hundred years ago. Our greatest disadvantage is that the mythology of the late twentieth century created a commonsense that there was no imperative for new political imaginaries; all that was required was the perfection and maintenance of the world that had already been won. This commonsense was always contested — particularly by people who were not advantaged by the arrangements of power and privilege that had been made — but nevertheless, those of us who were born into the later part of the twentieth century had little expectation or preparation for making the world anew. Our counterparts last century — from their many distinct and competing perspectives — are different from us primarily in that they knew they would have to build a new world for the new century, and they were determined to see it done. Turning our attention to the politics of futurity is my way of inviting us to embrace that kind of ambition — to understand the task before us and pursue it.

Purpose: The politics of care

The politics of care is a key component of radical Black feminist pragmatism (RBFPP), a theory I developed by observing the theory and practice of the Black Lives Matter movement.⁷ It “is a reframing of the purpose, priorities and experience of politics [...] a way of pursuing self, community, and political governance that values feelings and somatic embodiment along with what we are enabled to do in the world as it actually exists.”⁸ The politics of care has a different theory of relation than do dominant theories of politics whether left or right, because it moves away from analyses that “turn on the fairness of distribution

and the existence and adequacy of rights, and instead embraces the view that because people matter, they are entitled to care, and, as such, care must be the main subject of governance."⁹

Care has largely been organized out of politics in Western enlightenment traditions. Neither liberalism nor socialism in their traditional nineteenth- and twentieth-century forms have understood care as important parts of public life. Indeed, in both traditions when care is thought of at all, it is thought to properly be undertaken off the public stage, largely out of the public eye, an element of life that is alongside and often beneath the abstract principles and interest-based economic motives that are the proper province of public life. The affect, labor, necessity, and genius of care, which is wholly responsible for the maintenance of all life as well as the basis for any possible sociality which may lead to society or politics, is obscured from view—constructed as private, emotional, and apolitical. It is identified with the feminine and racialized, and put in the category of nature, dependence, and low-skill.

Care has been the province of mere life, of the body. As Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto write:

The liberal tradition in Western philosophy centers on a world view in which the rational, autonomous man accomplishes his life plan in the public realm. This tradition assumes a theory of self in which people are isolated, in which the self is prior to its activities and to its connections with others.¹⁰

In this conception, purposive activity becomes defined by those things that are separate from the labors that enable and maintain life and it is assumed that the necessary tasks, invention, endurance, knowledge and diplomacy that constitute caring “somehow will get done, if not by oneself, then by slaves, women, or lower class or lower caste people.”¹¹

At best, care has been identified by socialist feminists as a form of labor or discussed as one of the constellations of social forces “behind the hidden abode” that is a condition of the possibility for capitalist accumulation, commodification, and system functioning. However, these dominant views of care have left our polities and societies unwell. There is precarity at almost every level, in addition to worsening survival and health outcomes in the US and other rich countries. The trending of most people’s lived experience toward precarity has led to the reinvigoration and re-legitimation of politics that frankly and explicitly deny the possibility of plural egalitarian democratic societies. Indeed, everywhere we turn is a purported “crisis” of care. This crisis is often represented as the demise of the welfare state, specifically the lack, inaccessibility, unaffordability, racism and coloniality of child and elder care. But we can see it in many more places.

The deferral of curbing the warming of the planet, the disinvestment in infrastructure, rampant housing unaffordability, the cutting back of resources or direct attack on education at all levels, the looking away as children die from gun violence and preventable diseases.

But the crisis is constitutive—as Neve Gordon and Catherine Rottenberg point out “the current “reign of carelessness” informing the political and economic spheres is the result of “histories of colonial, imperialist, misogynist, and white supremacist violence compounded by now decades of intensified neoliberal policies and the reduction of ever more domains of our lives to a market logic.”¹² This is what happens in a society where we have banished the basic precondition for all life, subject formation, and intersubjective relation to a marginal position outside the direct concern of politics.

A politics of care, by contrast, takes its central remit and purpose to be understanding, cultivating, and providing the means for the care that is always required for life. It is a Black feminist politics that “focuses attention on the *for*—as in for what and for whom—which is to say, it focuses attention on the kind of worlds we want to build.”¹³ Importantly, the politics of care takes as given the fact that all life is in-relation—the autonomous, independent subject is a theoretical fiction that does not reflect the reality of life in the world where the individual is always already in-context, and thus interdependence (rather than independence or dependence) is the scale that is most relevant to both wellbeing and justice. In this way, the politics of care both presents us with and demands a new purpose for politics and new possibilities for living together.

There have, of course, been strands of this way of thinking all along. Black feminist philosophers have always understood care—as both a form of ethical life and a politics—as an alternative ground for the organization of society, politics, and economics or what Nancy Fraser calls an “institutionalized social order.”¹⁴ Audre Lorde observes in her essay “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” that “interdependency ... is the way to a freedom which allows the *I* to *be*, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative.” That is, the politics of care is concerned with cultivation, with nurturing potential, and with measuring the outcomes on scales calibrated toward flourishing rather than growth or profit. Skeptics will loudly wonder what constitutes wellbeing, but this is not much of a mystery. An extensive literature in psychology, health, and economics codifies manifold evidence that wellbeing requires the satisfaction of basic physical needs, especially nurturance of health and access to healthcare, along with opportunities for robust social connection and high levels of self-determination.¹⁵

In Western, patriarchal traditions, interdependence is an undertheorized term, one that is sometimes used to describe a global distribution

of labor that is, inevitably, racialized and hierarchal or it is a threat—a stopover on the road to dependence, which is the antithesis, in that framework, to independence and the freedom that it is supposed to produce. Care is even more marginalized from study except as a category of waged work (usually as healthcare), and as such, is organized out of politics. Care is not perceived or accounted for as necessary, formal and informal, mutual, intersubjective, worthy work undertaken between people relating as Lorde puts it “within equality.”¹⁶ This relation within equality, according to Lorde, is not the aggregation of individuals who share common characteristics of advantage and whose existence and maintenance relies on the unpaid care work of relatives, servants, or the enslaved—an advantaged state that philosophers then name universal. It is instead a dynamic relation between people who exist in-context, who are born into different experiences—experiences that are structured by the world as it is before they arrive and yet inevitably impacted by their arrival. Relation within equality requires taking our differences in structural position, experience, access to power and resources, and divergences in social mores and meanings into explicit account in our assessments about what our political projects are and ought to be. A politics of care builds parallel institutions that help us to relate within equality because, those who practice politics in this way, understand interdependence to be both fundamental and coextensive with difference.

And so, attempts to devise ways to handle differences with care, not as threat or deficiency or subjects for bland tolerance or even objects for celebration, but instead as essential resources for problem solving. When Lorde pens the words, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” she means that if only the logics and patterns of action that are dominant in “racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy,” then “only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable.”¹⁷ Changes that are too narrow in ambition and scope cannot undo systems that are made to perpetuate current conditions. The failure of too-timid reforms can produce disillusionment and deepen the hold of the desultory logics that set the terms of the “normal,” a situation in which most people are made to suffer in patterned and predictable ways, while being assured there is no realistic alternative.

Instead, a politics of care looks toward what Gumbs calls “life giving actions,” in which “the practice of creating, nurturing, affirming, and supporting life” is the main purpose of politics. In Gumbs’s version of a politics in which care is the central organizing principle, she reframes the question of politics so that one is compelled to ask: “what is the most life-giving choice? What is the most nourishing choice? What is the choice that will sustain us for the long term?”¹⁸

It may seem peculiar to think of nourishing care as a central question for politics. Can this kind of care stand shoulder-to-shoulder with freedom and equality? Can the cultivation of life-giving care—conceptually—go toe-to-toe with justice? The Black feminist tradition would ask: Why not? In terms of maintaining society and economy, in terms of moral suasion and productivity, there is nothing inherent to the notions underpinning Western liberalism that make them more important or better guiding questions than those set forth by Black feminist thinkers who have always been most concerned with how one can make a world in which what June Jordan called *aliveness*—self-determination, reciprocal community, and joy—are possible even for those who were, as Lorde notes, “never meant to survive.”¹⁹

However, as I elaborate the politics of care, it is important to keep in mind how care has also been weaponized as paternalism, domination, and even lethal violence—indeed, most of the institutions in current American society which purport to be in the business of caring for the vulnerable, like the child welfare system, homeless shelters, or temporary homes for victims of domestic violence—do anything but, burdening people in need of nourishing care with scrutiny, exclusion, demands for the performance of perfect victimhood and compliance,²⁰ as well as resources too limited to meet need even if and after such performances are achieved.

As Miriam Ticktin’s work has illustrated,²¹ liberal forms of political care like welfare and humanitarianism are premised on a notion of hierarchy in which the exclusion of the unqualified or undeserving, however and by whomever that is defined, are of paramount importance, often eclipsing in both orientation and cost, the provision of aid, and almost always obscuring the possibility and pursuit of wellbeing for people who are suffering under human-made systems of domination and oppressions—the unmaking of which should be the overarching project of caring politics. The care of liberal states is often a necropolitical care, a set of policies motivated by “narrow moral sentiment,” backed with ever shrinking material investment, and built for the purpose of deciding whose lives matter and whose do not, who to let live and who to make die, with the consequences of those actions laying out in racialized, gendered, and global patterns that are too familiar to social scientists to bear repeating. The long train of abuses, to borrow a phrase, have been compounding for hundreds of years and have yielded more than enough evidence (which only continues to accumulate) that the organization of modernity has limits that cannot be overcome by the dominant principles or practices of liberal, capitalist, heteropatriarchy. It is time to head in a different direction—to be guided by a different set of values which may birth a different kind of politics—a politics for a new age.

I believe the politics of care should give purpose to this new politics—this politics toward futurity. However, let me be clear, I do not mean to idealize a politics of care as entirely “outside” current systems and therefore, a pure alternative to the messiness, conflict, and contests for power that are at the heart of collective self-governance. There is nothing that can save us from that—and we don’t need to be saved; it is what politics *is*, and it is neither negative nor impure to want power or organize for its taking. What is at issue is the way those contests are organized and what for. Rather, putting the concept of care at the center of politics is not merely a nice thing to do, it is a realignment of political thinking that has the generative potential of enabling us to exceed the limits of the long twentieth century and building a twenty-first century politics that begins to unmake white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism as the organizing principles of our institutions.

Let me emphasize here that I do not speak of utopia. I never speak of utopia and am not interested in it. Even if pro-egalitarian democracy forces succeed, the win will be partial, contingent, and subject to politics. There are always remainders. That is not something to mourn; it is just a fact. Take heart that what we can do, what many people in eras before ours have done, is to establish a new commonsense and work to enable systemic and institutional transformations that will greatly improve on those we have inherited. We will know we have improved not because the designs of new institutions are more pristine, but because more people in more places will be able to live more flourishing lives. This can be measured, although we will have to utilize new metrics.²²

But, of course, the new systems, the fruit of militant and pragmatic imagination, will produce their own patterned vexations, some of which will be incompatible with the political values that they profess. The hope is that the injustices of the new world are different than that of the old—that progress means different problems. As Octavia Butler says, “there is no end to what a living world will demand of you.”²³ Likewise, there is no end of history and no end of politics, they are continuous endeavors—reinvigorated and reimagined across generations for their own purposes in their own times. This is the pragmatism inherent in worldbuilding.

Strategy: Political fabulation with fabrication

Political fabulation with fabrication is the second piece of the Black feminist repertoire toward political futurity that I offer here. It is a form of strategic storytelling and institution-building that can be used to enact a politics of care. Political fabulation with fabrication is based on what I have elsewhere called “pragmatic imagination,”²⁴ but this strategic

form should not be considered either “prefigurative”²⁵ or “fugitive,”²⁶ in either nature or aim. Instead, we should think of political fabulation with fabrication as means of creating “parallel institutions”²⁷ (and the practices and values that undergird them) that we mean to be load-bearing for the rest of society as they gain capacity.

Parallel institutions, according to Erica Chenoweth, are “unofficial social, cultural, economic, and governance systems and practices that circumvent—and perhaps ultimately supplant—the regimes’ structures.”²⁸ Chenoweth notes that “they are *parallel* because they’re working alongside but separate from existing oppressive institutions,” and that they “succeed when they can meet community needs that the existing system does not.” They go on to explain that parallel institutions are designed and built *before* power changes hands and old institutions are defunct. Instead, “movements develop such institutions—and build legitimacy and authority—before they have fully ‘won,’” so that they have the capacity to govern when it falls to them to do so.

The work of creating these parallel institutions must be done through both speech and action, through empirically grounded but imaginative storytelling, or “fabulation,” paired with place-based making or fabrication. The pairing of these elements—the description and the doing—is a classic way to understand how people accomplish things. Aristotle described this symbiotic duality as *theoria* and *praxis*. Socrates named similar elements *episteme* and *techne*. Arendt talks of *speech* and *action*. These characteristics are always in a dynamic relation.

I have chosen to use Hartman’s “fabulation” as the storytelling/descriptive/speech-making term because it incorporates within it both empirics and imagination: the archive and the what it leaves out, the ledger and its uncaptured excesses.²⁹ I adapt and amend Hartman’s methodological approach to the archives for political life. To wit, I consider fabulation to be an act of imagination, but one that must always be rooted in some set of empirical realities, though they may be partial.³⁰

In her methodology-creating article, “Venus in Two Acts,” Sadiya Hartman laments that the archive is a “failed witness” to the lives of Black women who were enslaved in the Americas. She recounts the specific example of two Black girls tortured to death on a slave ship by a captain who was tried and acquitted. “We only know,” she writes, “what can be extrapolated from an analysis of the ledger or borrowed from the world of [their] captors.” In this case, as in most, that is very little—a few words, and those, as Hartman notes, are not about the women as human beings but about the “violence, excess, mendacity and reason that seized hold of their lives, [and] transformed them into commodities and corpses.” But, Hartman laments, “I want to say more

than this."³¹ She recounts that she wanted to say more, but was apprehensive—not wanting to either titillate with “scenes of subjection” or indulge in what she calls the self-consolation of romance—of reading between the lines of captivity, of imagining a caesura in the episteme of the barracoon—a breath, a moment where eyes catch—in which she could imagine the “two girls as friends,” in which the one nicknamed Venus “could have beheld her dying friend, whispered comfort in her ear, rocked her with promises.”³²

Hartman reports that she feared imagining that such a “free state”³³ could have emerged, even if for seconds—long enough to be alive, acknowledged, grievable and aggrieved. However, she concludes that despite the dual dangers of avaristic titillation or a self-indulgent “romance of resistance,”³⁴ she is nevertheless tasked with telling “an impossible story,” and with “amplifying the impossibility of its telling” because it is one of the only ways to “make visible the production of disposable lives” to show the violence of not only the systems that torture and murder, but also the cruelty of the history that is incapable of remembering anything else. Importantly, she works through the anguish of the archive not only to declare that the lives of the archive’s subjects mattered, but also to “demand us to imagine a future in which the afterlife of slavery has ended.”³⁵ Hartman further declares,

The necessity of trying to represent what we cannot, rather than leading to pessimism or despair must be embraced as the impossibility that conditions our knowledge of the past and animates our desire for a liberated future.³⁶

Hartman invents the methodology of “critical fabulation” so that she can represent the past more realistically, practically imagining based on the partial truth that the preserved facts provide but with an ear for and care toward the voices and perspectives which do not appear in the archive even though we know they were present. Shatema Threadcraft argues,

If the necropolitical hauntings of Western politics are not adequately attended to, democracies cannot fulfill their function. [...] if democracy’s death worlds are allowed to function without intervention, the life worlds of democracy will fail. Democratic theory has not attended adequately to the haunting, to these premature deaths, the worlds they produce, and what democracies require in their wake.³⁷

Hartman uses her method to look backward, illustrating proof of life even in the “death worlds” that have laid the desecrated foundation of this nation, for the depth, color, humanity, romance, and hope that are missing from the documents but surely present in the lived experiences of those recorded there.

I propose to use this method to look forward, practically imagining the multiplicity of possible futures in which the haints that haunt US democracy can begin to be laid to rest because we are able to redesign and reconstruct democracy in a way that cultivates flourishing life.

Critical fabulation is a genealogical method of “narrating counter-histories” that is “inseparable from writing a history of the present,”³⁸ by the same token any history of the present is indivisible from assumptions, claims, and projections of our futures. The subjunctive tense can be cast backward or forward. The “doubts, wishes and possibilities”³⁹ contained in the verb “to be” when it is used without declarative inflection or tense can tell tales of past, present and future — conveying the contingency and constructedness of our understandings and actions — as if we were, as though we should, what we might have, that we could do.

Hartman insists she does not fabulate to find “a lesson for our future or a hope for history,” but only to show how our lives “hang in the balance” in the “as-yet-incomplete project of freedom” just as our ancestors’ did.⁴⁰ I purpose to push this insight further, in order to assert that while it is impossible to rescue the dead or claim a present free of the injustices that dictated who was let to live and who was made to die, it is possible — indeed, necessary — to fabulate buildable futures in which the logic of white supremacy and hold of racial capitalism do not structure social, political, or economic relations. This is, of course, an immense, almost unimaginable task. But that is precisely why it is important to develop methods for both its imagination and making. This practical imagination, grounded in what we know of the world as it is and how it came to be, is the evidence-based dreaming of its unmaking, *always paired* with bold and iterative plans regarding construction of new versions of the world we will share.

Fabulation is the method of making the map to otherwise worlds. Think of Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*, written in 1993, in which she posits an authoritarian leader of the United States who rises to power with the slogan “Make America Great Again.” It is a fabulation to be sure, but one based in evidence and knowledge of the world, practically imagining the implications of a particular set institutional arrangements, systemic conditions, environmental realities and political choices. Her meditation yields fiction, but fiction that seems eerily prescient because it is not dreamed out of whole cloth; it is extrapolated from known variables or, as Butler described it “the sociological aspects of our future lives.” Robyn Maynard argues

Parable was an “If this goes on...” series, bringing to life the long-term consequences of the status quo: increasing corporate control over all aspects of animal and human life; uninterrupted ecological destruction, racism, and labour exploitation rendering so many lives disposable.⁴¹

Political fabulation is a technique for evidence-based speculation. It is a way of training the imagination toward worldbuilding by telling stories that help us to understand perspectives that diverge from dominant common sense and allow us the curiosity and freedom to play out scenarios in the subjunctive tense. However, fabulation by itself does not a world make. Storytelling is crucial, but it requires combination with material manifestation to become potentially transformative to people's lives. To that end, I pair political fabulation with fabrication.

Fabrication, defined as the process of inventing or manufacturing something, is the term in this dynamic phrase that is associated with doing. It is the working out of the materials that will make the plans come to life. It is an experimental, even artistic process, but one with concrete aims. Fabrication is the craft, the engineering, and the political economy that enables the product to be distributed and used. It is the sourcing of the thread, the weaving on the loom, and the market, cooperative, or gift economy that sees the blanket tucked around somebody's shoulders. It is through fabulation with fabrication that new worlds—new forms of life—are both made and made to make sense. Fabrication can be thought of as akin to what Cindi Katz calls "reworking," the thinking and creation of different kinds of worlds that take place neither wholly inside existing institutions and relations of power nor wholly outside them.⁴²

In politics, the kind of political fabrication that is most useful is the making of parallel institutions. A paradigmatic example of parallel institutions were those that developed in the American colonies in the eighteenth century. The colonial assemblies and town meetings that handled local governance beyond the purview of the royal governors appointed by the British crown became the center of a nonviolent civil resistance movement that preceded the armed struggle that we often call the Revolution. John Adams argued in an 1815 letter to Thomas Jefferson that had the war been fought without the public education and governing institutions that were built and then turned toward revolutionary ends in the fifteen years before any shot was fired, it would not have been successful.

What do we mean by the revolution? The war? That was no part of the revolution; it was only an effect and a consequence of it. The revolution was in the minds of the people, and this was effected from 1760—1775 [...] The Records of thirteen legislatures, the pamphlets, newspapers in all the colonies ought be consulted, during that period, to ascertain the steps by which the public opinion was enlightened and informed concerning the authority of parliament over the colonies.⁴³

Parallel institutions are the experimental bulwark of futurity. They are the spaces where people try out the principles, processes, procedures, and policy that attempt to fulfill social, cultural, economic, and governance needs that are unmet by older forms. Because these institutions are experimental it should be expected that some will succeed, and some will fail. However, these experiments are not meant to be frivolous or merely expressive; the idea is that as the capacity of successful parallel institutions increases and people are turned away or divest from older forms of social, economic, and political organization, these new lifeways will come to take their place.

Tactics: The political uses of the Trickster

Of course, it must be admitted that embarking from the “shoreline” of modernity is not something we yet know exactly how to do. Therefore, we must begin by doing things we think will produce different patterns. This is where we must consider ways of engaging in politics informed by Neil Robert’s concept of “marronage” or what Stephanie Camp, Jasmine Syedullah, and Shatema Threadcraft call “truant” politics.⁴⁴ However, I would like to think of these forms of politics as varieties of *trickster politics* – agentive political methods for shaping the world that work within and outside operative systems of power at will and for their self-determined best good.

Fabulation and fabrication are about the practical imagination that it takes to locate ourselves in the world as it is, based on evidence, and then project ourselves beyond the limiting scripts of what is probable by contemplating what we can *make* possible through collective action. However, tricksterism is about the inversion, disruption, displacement and reengineering of power relations and hierarchies. The Trickster takes in the power relations operative in any given place and time, has a hearty laugh, and then turns things upside down and inside out in a way that might allow them to land on top. The Trickster can be defiant, angry, refusing, fierce, and revolutionary but is also always capable of winking; of humor, joy, and mischief. The Trickster is serious about their goals but not solemn in their execution. They are alive to every possibility and receptive to the twists, turns, and acrobatics that can manifest the ones they most favor. The Trickster may not win, but they never lose, because the game is always in play – and if at first, they don’t succeed, why, they will try and try again.

The Trickster is a folkloric figure represented in nearly every culture, but rarely taken up as a subject or model of agency in political theory. This is, in part, because the Trickster is morally ambiguous – in folklore, Anansi, the West African spider deity, might show you how to build a house or trick you into burning your mansion down.

Br'er Rabbit, the clever trickster of African American folklore, might lead you safely through the briar patch or, if you have been rude and disrespectful, leave you there, helpless and stuck. And Br'er's later kin, the "wascally wabbit" Bugs Bunny, uses his antagonists' eagerness to hunt him to lure them into traps. The clever Japanese *kitsune*, feminine fox spirits, might protect a village family's crops or trick an immoral sovereign into ruin. Coyote, the sometimes powerfully benevolent, sometimes cruelly malicious creative god of many North American indigenous peoples, might gift fire to a community without an energy source or make it impossible for an arrogant chief to find hunting game. The Indian enchantress Mohini might use her wiles to tempt gods into sharing their power or steal their immortality and redistribute it to those she chooses. The Norse shapeshifter Loki might help outcasts find creative ways out of impossible situations or show powerful gods that their actions have consequences by enabling their heretofore "impossible" deaths.

Trickster figures are underdogs who excel at using the rules, brawn, and mores of the powerful to upend the victories that they believe are their due. They are considered morally ambiguous because they do not willingly "take on suffering, loss, or sacrifice in the hope of redemption nor are they necessarily committed to the virtues of deliberation. Instead, they evade sacrifice by resorting routinely to irony, cunning, and refusal."⁴⁵ Tricksters are funny, irreverent, calculating, and often vicious, making alliances based on relationships, not rules. Their refusal is not categorical, ideological, or birthed from despair; it is situational, intelligent, and arises to serve an "internal sense of satisfaction" and "requirement toward excellence," the goal of which is to aspire toward self-determination, "life appeal and fulfillment."⁴⁶ In this way, Tricksters are tactical disruptors. They do not seek chaos for its own sake, but understand that settled practices and procedures are often crafted to keep them out of power and away from influence, so interrupting them is necessary – and can also be fun. The Trickster believes neither that suffering is inherently ennobling, nor that those who oppose them can necessarily be redeemed. They do not rely on appeals to elicit empathy in the hopes of reforming the souls of those who seek to dominate because they know that parading their grief before the powerful can elicit resentment rather than facilitating *rapprochement*.⁴⁷ Tricksters exploit the gaps between authority, pride, custom, law, using elite cleavages and skill to leverage power in unpredictable ways (indeed, often utilizing the power of unpredictability itself).

In my understanding, trickster politics are a democratic approach well suited to contesting arrangements of power that seem settled. Trickster politics do not necessarily require abstention from institutional

politics, but Tricksters are never fooled that such participation is an end in itself. Tricksters map power and are interested in wielding it, but they seek the upper hand from unexpected angles. They are willing to take short cuts play long games, or both, depending on what approaches can help them meet their goals. Those who use trickster politics as a guide for their tactics, undertake political actions based on their collective assessments of conditions, their own purpose and values, their political strategies, and goals. They are not automatically curtailed by extant political arrangements, conventional wisdom, traditional loyalties, or institutional routines. Trickster politics are a way of engaging in political contests that understands that the existing systems of appeal and redress were not designed with them in mind, may not be accessible to them, and routinely produce barriers to their participation as well as outcomes that unjustly favor those who already hold power. Therefore, Tricksters refuse automatic duty to the rules of the regime while actively claiming their right to occupy space within and outside the polity in ways that build the power, autonomy, and influence of the collectivities they have imagined and organized.

Trickster politics are not new, even if we have not understood trickster politics as a genre of action. For example, Aimi Hamraie's description of the "crip technoscience," the use of "strategies of friction, disorientation, and nonconformity," using "self-taught design practices, creating their own tools, curb cuts, and ramps with repurposed materials, learning to code and hack computers, and tinkering with the structures of everyday life."⁴⁸ The practice of "curb cutting" is especially instructive. Under cover of darkness, disabled activists used sledgehammers to smash spaces into sidewalks and then pour new concrete ramps to make wheelchair-accessible pathways through San Francisco in the 1960s and '70s. Disability activists were not just participating in protest actions; they were enacting a politics that literally remade the world—both changing the physical environment and upending the episteme, transforming themselves from "noncompliant users" of sidewalks that didn't work for them, into crip technoscienceists, "makers [...] creating a new standard of knowledge."⁴⁹ These activists asserted knowledge from their lived experience—knowledge that often contradicted experts who tried to speak for/without them by focusing on individual physical rehabilitation rather than structural changes that would make it more possible and more pleasant to live in the world as they already existed.

Of course, when curb cuts were put in—first via the guerilla "critical making" and later because of state and federal funding and policy—many different people benefitted. Hamraie quotes disability activists Ed Roberts as saying, "When we first talked to legislators about the issue, they told us, curb cuts ... who is going to use them? ...

when curb cuts were put in, they discovered that access for disabled people benefits many others as well ... people pushing strollers use curb cuts, as do people on bikes and elderly people who can't lift their legs so high."⁵⁰

Disability activists did not wait for policy wins to remake the world; they used (literal) concrete, unauthorized tactics to make a material change that would improve their lives. They did this while *also* arguing that these changes benefit "every body" and that they could and should be taken up both as new ways of conceiving space, and as matters of law and municipal funding. However, these actions and arguments did not proceed in a linear fashion—the curb cuts were not made as proof of concept, they were the work of "noncompliant users empowered as makers."⁵¹ Curb cutting is "simultaneously productive and disruptive"; its political efficacy is not via expression or appeal (though since it is experimental, it might be taken up for those purposes as the opportunity emerges), but through a material enactment that supports retelling our stories about how things are, how things work, and the ways it is possible to live. This kind of disruptive and productive retelling is a work of fabulation with fabrication deployed by political actors who are willing to work both outside and within established institutions according to their preferences and political analyses and as political opportunities arise. These political Tricksters took advantage of both exogenous opportunities that they happened to encounter and recognize, and those they made, sledgehammers in hand.

Goal: Worldbuilding

Worldbuilding is something that people just do—it is an extension of human beings' tool-using nature, but there is something very important about knowing what you're doing while you're doing it. The worldbuilding I advocate for in this Black feminist repertoire toward futurity is one that aims toward democratic redesign and reconstruction. Lisa Beard defines "democratic redesign" as "reimagining our built environment at multiple scales," privileging "aliveness." Reconstruction alludes to the period of transformative politics that was undone too soon at the end of the Civil War, but also refers more generally to that which is rebuilt after being damaged or destroyed. Democratic redesign, and the reconstruction that must accompany it, are a part of the Black feminist repertoire I have proposed here, which is built on the politics of care, practically imagined via the strategy of fabulation with fabrication and carried out with trickster politics, as needed.

However, this is not the only possible form of worldbuilding. The globally ascendent Right-wing "post liberal,"⁵² "technofascist,"⁵³ and ethnonationalist movements intend for their actions to reshape

the world as we know it, and are using the decision-making power they have won to do so. They are not in the business of telling their supporters what cannot be done. Over the last seven decades, they have deeply invested in civil society institutions that serve as places where ideas, interpersonal connections, community belonging, policy, messaging, and political strategies for taking and using power against opponents and towards aspirational ends have been nurtured. The visions of the future in popular circulation that break significantly from the past belong to them. They include apocalyptic, isolationist fantasies of sovereign company towns at sea or on other planets, the abandonment of earth or the deferral of its maintenance for human habitation to artificial intelligences that do not yet exist, the ascendance of artificial superintelligences that enable the ultra-wealthy to cheat death, and religious accelerationism meant to speed the end times and ascension to heaven.⁵⁴ Twentieth century-style liberal commonsense both refuses to acknowledge the power of these fantasies—backed by massive amounts of capital—to shape the world and fails to offer compelling alternatives. The codification and enactment of visions of the twenty-first century that are not anti-humanist, anti-democratic, anti-egalitarian, or anti-planet-earth will have to come from people who are willing to loudly claim new futures in which we try something new.

There are some quarters where these experiments in thought and action have already begun, where people are nurturing parallel institutions in the world as it is, as a bulwark for the world they and others are contributing to building. Below is one example in a universe of many, each utilizing some of the elements of the Black feminist repertoire for a politics of futurity.

Moms 4 Housing

In 2019, Dominique Walker organized a group of mothers facing housing insecurity under the name Moms 4 Housing in Oakland, CA. The group of women, living in West Oakland, were faced with a housing landscape in which large corporations like Wedgewood Properties bought up dozens of properties to flip for resale to richer, whiter denizens who they hoped to attract to historically Black working-class neighborhoods. Many houses were bought at once by corporations that had no need for homes, and then held vacant for long periods while real estate developers waited for the land to appreciate enough to make it worth renovating these holdings into luxury properties. This practice created a housing market with artificially inflated prices that made it nearly impossible for working people living in the neighborhood to obtain homes—places where they could care for

themselves and their loved ones in safety. Neighborhoods of houses that are kept from being used as homes are antithetical to the well-being of the populations that live there. So, one day in November 2019, not too long before Thanksgiving, Walker and Sameerah Karim, another mother who had been rendered homeless by the structural geography of their neighborhood, walked with their children into a vacant, unlocked house that had been held empty for two years and made it their home.

As Brandi Summers and Desiree Fields write, “the women enacted a politics of emplacement, literally setting themselves in place, through the intimate practice of constructing domesticity.”⁵⁵ They go on to argue, “Through reclaiming space without seeking inclusion into an institution predicated on abnegating their personhood, the Moms thus abolish the terms by which we know the home and homeownership.”⁵⁶ Indeed, Walker argues:

This home isn’t owned by a person, it’s owned by a corporation, so nobody owns this home, a corporation owns this home. The people that own this house, Wedgewood, they’re a displacement machine, and they don’t deserve this house. I deserve to be here, and we’re gonna stay here. We’re not leaving.⁵⁷

The women not only claimed a space for themselves, but also studied with and organized a large group of affected people in such a way that they were able to use loopholes and ambiguities in municipal laws to assert their right to claim the space they needed to live and begin to create conditions for thriving.

The mothers made strident efforts to cultivate “Mom’s House” into a homeplace: they paid the utility bills, power-washed the exterior walls, added bunk beds for their children, installed a water heater, stove, and refrigerator, patched the roof, and decorated the living room with comfortable furniture. Neighbors delivered food, flowers, and potted plants to welcome them to the neighborhood and support their cause. These actions forced Wedgewood to respond and be held accountable, publicly.⁵⁸

They used fabulation with fabrication and trickster tactics to speculatively make the world that they needed to care for themselves and their community in real time. They did not wait for permission. But their politics extended beyond meeting their own needs and to creating conditions in which others would also be able to care for themselves. Through their efforts they were able to not only secure a place of shelter for themselves and their children, *but also built a political coalition that led to changes in California law* preventing corporations from buying up foreclosed homes in bulk—which leads to housing

shortages, unaffordability, and destabilizing economic conditions—preventing people from caring for themselves and one another and from nourishing communities that can cultivate wellbeing.⁵⁹

Moms 4 Housing built their political praxis based on a politics of care, used fabulation with fabrication as a strategy for action, engaged trickster tactics, and accomplished the goal of remaking their political environment into one that could meet their needs and the needs of others. In so doing, these women refused automatic duty to the legal regime that systematically disadvantaged them while also speculatively claiming and working to create a permanent, recognized space—for both living and political strategizing—amidst the slippage between law and care. Moms 4 Housing remade a part of their world such that both they and others in their community could claim what they needed to live and thrive.

CONCLUSION

The pragmatism of worldbuilding

As John Dewey pointed out, political life, especially in democracy, is always a “task before us,” and thus must always be approached with a spirit of both humility and resolve, conviction and restraint. This pragmatic humility is not one that abides neutrality, champions moderation as such, valorizes a fictive “center” of ideological spectrums, or excuses inaction. And the restraint of pragmatism is not one that encourages passivity or the deferral of action. Instead, the pragmatist’s humility is in knowing that even if they have identified the problem correctly, the solution, even when radical, will be a communal, emergent, work-in-progress that may not work entirely as intended and, in any case, won’t last forever. The understanding of this limitation, which is simply a limitation of the human condition, is what makes the pragmatist humble, yet determined—for she knows that although the doing of things is always and ever subject to error and undoing, anything worth doing is nevertheless worth doing well.

As Charlene Seigfried writes, “social reconstruction arises from the interactive nature of theory and practice and is guided by the inclusion and empowerment of those neglected or abused by the current structures of power.”⁶⁰ This approach is what might allow us to make new things possible—going beyond twentieth-century liberal horizons of inclusion and representation as well as Marxist materialisms that struggle to take the importance of identity and lived experience into their structural accounts and plans for action. These ideas, from liberal to left, are not bad or useless—I don’t write against them dismissively or with bitterness—but it is time to try something new: to put “shaping change,” to paraphrase Octavia Butler, at the center of a twenty-first century politics of futurity.

Because late modernity explicitly stole the horizon of political thought with the declaration of the “end of history”—and that logic was taken up even in circles where the politics were disputed—we forget that bold inventiveness is the birthright of humanity and the hallmark of everything that we have created, from simple tools to hegemonic political systems. No part of modernity, for worse or for better, would have been possible without widespread faith in and action toward political worldbuilding—that is, of making the story one is telling come true through collaborative political action in the moment. The stories of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries are not the stories most of us want to retell or make real in this epoch. However, the audacity of the undertaking of making the modern world, the efforts of ordinary, extraordinary people working together toward futurity, should serve as a lesson in what is possible and what we can make probable through visionary, pragmatic action—not in fantasy, but in fact.

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