

EMERGENT STRATEGY

Shaping Change, Changing Worlds

by adrienne maree brown



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

—Ella Baker

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

Now, another for the day and night coming.

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

As I am gathering and writing this book, there is a trail of ants moving along the ceiling of my room, and the sounds of a small jungle town coming in and out of the screened open windows, birds cawing, laughter, children's delight emerging from that, then tears. A car backfires and I flinch, a lizard

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

peeks at me from the door. It's been raining for a few days and the air feels thick.

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

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

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

I love the scene at the end of *The Matrix* where Neo sees everything in green-on-black code. Emergent strategy is a way that all of us can begin to see the world in life-code—awakening us to the sacred systems of life all around us. Many of us have been and are becoming students of these systems of life, wondering if in fact we can unlock some crucial understanding about our own humanity if we pay closer attention to this place we are from, the bodies we are in.

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

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

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

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

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

The crisis is everywhere, massive massive massive.

And we are small.

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

A few words on what this book is and is not

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3 "Radical simply means 'grasping things at the root.'" —Angela Davis, "Let Us All Rise Together" Address, Spelman College, reprinted in *Women, Culture and Politics* (New York, Random House, 1989).

4 If that's you, then yay! I bet you're hella smart—help get us all free!

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

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

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

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

—Ryan Power, *Making Life*

This is not a book to displace all the strategic processes in play in social justice movements, or to discount the work

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

that has happened up until now—there have been effective movements towards justice and liberation throughout the history of human existence—I am thrilled by how humans have continuously stood up against our own weaknesses. I think throughout history we have done our best given what we knew, and we will continue to do so. I also know that there are so many brilliant strategists out there who turn data into action and policy, and I respect that work. I see this offering as a noticing that can shape our next steps, as more water joining the river. And as a way to get aware of what we have learned so far, so that we can move forward from there, instead of repeating lessons we have already learned.

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

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

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

I will be satisfied if this book sparks conversations, new practices, and projects where people keep noticing, observing,

and learning about emergence and liberation. If people see their experimental work affirmed by this content. And if I hear of people's self and collective transformation journeys related to emergent strategy, whether people use that exact terminology or not. I hope it is part of our (r)evolutionary journey.

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

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

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

The book can be engaged nonlinearly! There is an assessment section, you can start there and let that determine where you dive in. You can just go straight to the tools at the end and start facilitating and experimenting with them. Or you can start with a review of the principles and elements of

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

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

emergent strategy, which are in conversation with each other and can stand alone or cluster.

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

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

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

The Beginning of My Obsession

We have lived through a good half century of individualistic linear organizing (led by charismatic individuals or budget-building institutions), which intends to reform or revolutionize society, but falls back into modeling the oppressive tendencies against which we claim to be pushing. Some of those tendencies are seeking to assert one right way or one right strategy. Many align with the capitalistic belief that constant growth and critical mass is the only way to create change, even if they don't use that language.

There are new strategies emerging, or being remembered—many would describe this as a shift from a masculine to feminine (or patriarchal to feminist) leadership. I see that, and I think it is also about something beyond all of our binaries—evolving in relationship with our hierarchical tendency.

At this point in my life, I am not against hierarchy. I notice hierarchies in my life and attention all the time, inside my own preferences for whom I spend my waking hours

with and how I like to spend my time. I also deeply value experience and natural affinity for things—I am oriented towards healing and not math, so I don't offer myself up to create budgets for people. I follow other people's leadership around math, I offer leadership around healing, which comes more naturally to me. That give and take creates room for micro-hierarchies in a collaborative environment.

One of my favorite questions today is: How do we turn our collective full-bodied intelligence towards collaboration, if that is the way we will survive?

My favorite life forms right now are dandelions and mushrooms—the resilience in these structures, which we think of as weeds and fungi, the incomprehensible scale, the clarity of identity, excites me. I love to see the way mushrooms can take substances we think of as toxic, and process them as food, or that dandelions spread not only themselves but their community structure, manifesting their essential qualities (which include healing and detoxifying the human body) to proliferate and thrive in a new environment. The resilience of these life forms is that they evolve while maintaining core practices that ensure their survival.

A mushroom is a toxin-transformer, a dandelion is a community of healers waiting to spread... What are we as humans, what is our function in the universe?

One thing I have observed: When we are engaged in acts of love, we humans are at our best and most resilient. The love in romance that makes us want to be better people, the love of children that makes us change our whole lives to meet their needs, the love of family that makes us drop everything to take care of them, the love of community that makes us work tirelessly with broken hearts.

Perhaps humans' core function is love. Love leads us to observe in a much deeper way than any other emotion. I think of how delightful it is to see something new in my lovers' faces, something they may only know from inside as a feeling.

If love were the central practice of a new generation of organizers and spiritual leaders, it would have a massive impact

on what was considered organizing. If the goal was to increase the love, rather than winning or dominating a constant opponent, I think we could actually imagine liberation from constant oppression. We would suddenly be seeing everything we do, everyone we meet, not through the tactical eyes of war, but through eyes of love. We would see that there's no such thing as a blank canvas, an empty land or a new idea—but everywhere there is complex, ancient, fertile ground full of potential.

We would organize with the perspective that there is wisdom and experience and amazing story in the communities we love, and instead of starting up new ideas/organizations all the time, we would want to listen, support, collaborate, merge, and grow through fusion, not competition.

We would understand that the strength of our movement is in the strength of our relationships, which could only be measured by their depth. Scaling up would mean going deeper, being more vulnerable and more empathetic.

What does depth require from us, from me? In my longing for depth I have been re-rooting in the earth, in myself and my creativity, in my community, in my spiritual practices, honing in on work that is not only meaningful but feels joyful, listening with less and less judgment to the ideas and efforts of others, having visions that are long term.

Another part of walking this path has been the practice of humility—enough humility to learn, to be taught, to have teachers. As a military brat, I've always rebelled against anyone I perceived as an authority. It's been hard and rewarding work to relinquish some of that resistance in order to let wisdom in.

The Sufi poet Hafiz said, "How do I listen to others? As if everyone were my Teacher, speaking to me (Her) cherished last words."⁸

I am listening now with all of my senses, as if the whole universe might exist just to teach me more about love. I listen

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

to strangers, I listen to random invitations, I listen to criticisms, I listen to my body, I listen to my creativity and to the artists who inspire me, I listen to elders, I listen to my dreams and the books I am reading. I notice that the more I pay attention, the more I see order, clear messages, patterns, and invitations in the small or seemingly random things that happen in my life.

In all these ways, I meditate on love.

This practice lets me connect to the part of myself that is divine, aligned with the universe, and the place within myself where I can be a conduit for spiritual truth—I don't know what else to call it. What comes forth, as lessons and realizations and beliefs—doesn't feel political, or even about organizing. It feels like spirit leading me to the truth. Things like:

- The less I engage in gossip, the less I harbor suspicion, the more space I find within myself for miraculous experiences.
- When I fear the universe, I fear myself. When I love and am in awe of the universe, I love and am in awe of myself? Imagine then, the power when I align with the universe.
- Nothing is required of me more than being, and creating. Simultaneously being present with who I am, who we are as a species...and creating who we must become, and within that who I must become.

When these truths come to me, it reminds me of how so many past leaders have humbled themselves, or been forced—through prison sentences, exile, or other punitive measures—to live simple lives, spending time in prayer and

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

meditation and reflection. It reminds me that they all seem to have this solid core of truth within themselves that cannot be shaken by external pressures. Those truths resonate with me when I read or hear about them, even without the context of their whole spiritual journey. But I know that to truly understand, to truly be able to transform myself and develop that own unflappable core, I cannot vicariously live their spiritual lessons: I must walk my own path.

Our generation must walk the spiritual path that is available to us only in this time, with its own unique combination of wisdom and creation.

I think there are many ways to find that simple path within ourselves, and I think that those of us who wish to see a truly, radically different world must demand of ourselves the possibility that we are called to lead not from right to left, or from minority to majority, but from spirit towards liberation.

So I suppose it is time to come out as a spiritual leader, in my own way.

Which means—everyone is my teacher.

"You weren't starving before you got here. You were born full."

—Chani Nicholas

To write this book, I have had to get intimate with what I don't know, with my fears and doubts, with my restlessness. I was very young the first time I felt this restlessness, this sense that how things are isn't right, isn't enough, is empty even. Even as a child this sense made me nauseous, like dancing around a black hole, praying it is a portal and not a nothingness. As I get older, I understand that it is the unknown, and it is where the most exciting parts of life happen.

This is my leap into the unknown.

What is Emergent Strategy?

"Emergence is the way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions"—I will repeat these words from Nick Obolensky throughout this book because they are the clearest articulation of emergence that I have come across. In the framework of emergence, the whole is a mirror of the parts. Existence is fractal—the health of the cell is the health of the species and the planet.

There are examples of emergence everywhere.

Birds don't make a plan to migrate, raising resources to fund their way, packing for scarce times, mapping out their pit stops. They feel a call in their bodies that they must go, and they follow it, responding to each other, each bringing their adaptations.

There is an art to flocking: staying separate enough not to crowd each other, aligned enough to maintain a shared direction, and cohesive enough to always move towards each other. (Responding to destiny together.) Destiny is a calling that creates a beautiful journey.

Emergence is beyond what the sum of its parts could even imagine.

A group of caterpillars or nymphs might not see flight in their future, but it's inevitable.

It's destiny.

Oak trees don't set an intention to listen to each other better, or agree to hold tight to each other when the next storm comes. Under the earth, always, they reach for each other, they grow such that their roots are intertwined and create a system of strength that is as resilient on a sunny day as it is in a hurricane.

Dandelions don't know whether they are a weed or a brilliance. But each seed can create a field of dandelions. We are invited to be that prolific. And to return fertility to the soil around us.

Cells may not know civilization is possible. They don't amass as many units as they can sign up to be the same.

No—they grow until they split, complexify. Then they interact and intersect and discover their purpose—I am a lung cell! I am a tongue cell!—and they serve it. And they die. And what emerges from these cycles are complex organisms, systems, movements, societies.

Nothing is wasted, or a failure. Emergence is a system that makes use of everything in the iterative process. It's all data.

Octavia Butler said, "civilization is to groups what intelligence is to individuals. It is a means of combining the intelligence of many to achieve ongoing group adaptation."¹⁰

She also said "all that you touch you change / all that you change, changes you."¹¹ We are constantly impacting and changing our civilization—each other, ourselves, intimates, strangers. And we are working to transform a world that is, by its very nature, in a constant state of change.

Janine Benyus, a student of biomimicry, says "Nature/Life would always create conditions conducive to life."¹² She tells of a radical fringe of scientists who are realizing that natural selection isn't individual, but mutual—that species only survive if they learn to be in community.

How can we, future ancestors, align ourselves with the most resilient practices of emergence as a species?

Many of us have been socialized to understand that constant growth, violent competition, and critical mass are the ways to create change. But emergence shows us that adaptation and evolution depend more upon critical, deep, and authentic connections, a thread that can be tugged for support and resilience. The quality of connection between the nodes in the patterns.

Dare I say love.

And we know how to connect—we long for it.

Octavia Butler
*All successful life is
 Adaptable,
 Opportunistic,
 Tenacious,
 Interconnected, and
 Fecund.
 Understand this.
 Use it.
 Shape God.*

(amb)
 (Fractal)
 (Adaptive)
 (Nonlinear/Iterative)
 (Resilient/Transformative Justice)
 (Interdependent/Decentralized)
 (Creates More Possibilities)
 (Scholarship, Reflection)
 (Practice/Experiment)
 (Intention)

10 Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*.

11 Ibid.

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

Together we must move like waves. Have you observed the ocean? The waves are not the same over and over—each one is unique and responsive. The goal is not to repeat each other's motion, but to respond in whatever way feels right in *your* body. The waves we create are both continuous and a one-time occurrence. We must notice what it takes to respond well. How it feels to be in a body, in a whole—separate, aligned, cohesive. Critically connected.

I would call our work to change the world “science fictional behavior”—being concerned with the way our actions and beliefs now, today, will shape the future, tomorrow, the next generations.

We are excited by what we can create, we believe it is possible to create the next world.

We believe.

For me this might be because I was born to a trekkie—meaning one who watches *Star Trek*. Obsessively.

My dad watched *Star Trek* in a way that seems logical to me now. He watched this “post-racist” narrative as Black man from the deep south bringing multiracial children into a racist world—eyes wide, faith bubbling up.

We all watched it together, as his military career took our family from place to place. My parents intentionally took us away from the United States for our early years and I think they believed that by the time we came back here things would have changed on the race front.

That didn't happen, and the time came to return to the US—my father was stationed in Georgia. I think what I experienced there, the casual and constant presence of white supremacy, the knee-jerk assessments of my intelligence and humanity, is one of the foundational catalysts for my study of sci-fi, apocalypse and post-apocalypse, emergence and complexity.

I thought then, and I think now: This can't be all. No one survives this way, not long term. This can't be the purpose of our species, to constantly identify each other as “other,” build walls between us, and engage in both formal and informal wars against each other's bodies.

I felt, and feel, miraculous. It's confusing to feel so miraculous when so many people hate my skin and my history.

I see the miraculous in others—even those who hate me have heartbeats, and, I generally assume, have people they love. Why can't they love me? Should I love them anyway? How can I hold these massive contradictions?

I started reading sci fi obsessively, looking for options, for other worlds where I wasn't dismissed as an idealist or an inferior.

On that path I discovered Octavia Butler. Decades before my birth, she was working these same edges in her heart, pendulum swinging between curiosity, possibility, and hopelessness. Because if we can't articulate more viable futures, and adapt, our human future is pretty hopeless.

Octavia wrote novels with young Black women protagonists meeting aliens, surviving apocalypse, evolving into vampires, becoming telepathic networks, time traveling to reckon with slave-owning ancestors. Woven throughout her work are two things: 1) a coherent visionary exploration of humanity and 2) emergent strategies for being better humans.

A visionary exploration of humanity includes imagination. Octavia spent her life working through complex ideas of the future on behalf of humans.

As long as we operate in time the way we currently do—remembering the past, observing and acting in the present, imagining the future—there will be divergent paths that are moving in and out of alignment, in and out of conflict. Imagination is shaped by our entire life experience, our socialization, the concepts we are exposed to, where we fall in the global hierarchies of society.

Our ideas of right and wrong shift with time—right now it's clear to me that something is wrong if it hurts this planet. But if we don't claim the future, that sense of loyalty to earth, of environmentalism, could become outdated. Kenny Bailey¹³ helped me understand this—that justice, rights,

¹³ Kenny Bailey is one of the founders of the Design Studio for

things we take for granted, are not permanent. Once there were kings and queens all over the earth. Someday we might speak of presidents and CEOs in past tense only.

It is so important that we fight for the future, get into the game, get dirty, get experimental. How do we create and proliferate a compelling vision of economics and ecologies that center humans and the natural world over the accumulation of material?

We embody. We learn. We release the idea of failure, because it's all data.

But first we imagine.

We are in an imagination bantle.¹⁴

Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown and Renisha McBride and so many others are dead because, in some white imagination, they were dangerous. And that imagination is so respected that those who kill, based on an imagined, racialized fear of Black people, are rarely held accountable.

Imagination has people thinking they can go from being poor to a millionaire as part of a shared American dream. Imagination turns Brown bombers into terrorists and white bombers into mentally ill victims. Imagination gives us borders, gives us superiority, gives us race as an indicator of capability. I often feel I am trapped inside someone else's imagination, and I must engage my own imagination in order to break free.

All of this imagining, in the poverty of our current system, is heightened because of scarcity economics. There isn't enough, so we need to hoard, enclose, divide, fence up, and prioritize resources and people.

Innovation, a Boston-based artistic research and development outfit that serves civil society.

¹⁴ The goddess-writer Claudia Rankine (author of the award-winning book, *Citizen*) and Terry Marshall (of Inelligent Mischief, a creative intelligent design lab) each speak of this in different ways in their work. They have both inspired me and transformed my understanding of the importance of creative work.

We have to imagine beyond those fears. We have to ideate—imagine and conceive—together.

We must imagine new worlds that transition ideologies and norms, so that no one sees Black people as murderers, or Brown people as terrorists and aliens, but all of us as potential cultural and economic innovators. This is a time-travel exercise for the heart. This is collaborative ideation—what are the ideas that will liberate all of us?

The more people that collaborate on that ideation, the more that people will be served by the resulting world(s).

Science fiction is simply a way to practice the future together. I suspect that is what many of you are up to, practicing futures together, practicing justice together, living into new stories. It is our right and responsibility to create a new world.

What we pay attention to grows, so I'm thinking about how we grow what we are all imagining and creating into something large enough and solid enough that it becomes a tipping point.

Ursula Le Guin recently said, "It's up to authors to spark the imagination of their readers and to help them envision alternatives to how we live."¹⁵

I agree with her. As Toni Cade Bambara has taught us, we must make just and liberated futures irresistible.¹⁶ We are all the protagonists of what might be called the great turning, the change, the new economy, the new world.

And I think it is healing behavior, to look at something so broken and see the possibility and wholeness in it. That's how I work as a healer: when a body is between my hands, I let wholeness pour through. We are all healers too—we are creating possibilities, because we are seeing a future full of wholeness.

¹⁵ From the November 2014 acceptance speech for the National Book Foundation's medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters.

¹⁶ From interview with Kay Bonetti, 1982.

I suspect this is, in part, because we are practicing emergent strategies.

My mentor Grace Lee Boggs first raised the concept of emergence with us in Detroit after reading Margaret Wheatley's work about biomimicry and mycelium magic.¹⁷ Grace started asking us what our movements would look like if we focused on critical connections instead of critical mass.

We need each other. I love the idea of shifting from "mile wide inch deep" movements to "inch wide mile deep" movements that schism the existing paradigm.¹⁸

Now, I've said what emergence is. *Strategy* is a military term simply meaning a plan of action towards a goal.¹⁹

In our movements for social change (and in every other space I've ever been in), we generally use the word "strategy" in a positive sense. We say, "oh wow s/he's so strategic," and we mean that this person is smart, calculating, practical—a winner! But the word is actually not that discerning. Horrible, racist, sexist, ableist, patriarchal, outdated, inflexible plans can be pitched as strategic.

We must be more precise.

Emergent strategies are ways for humans to practice complexity and grow the future through relatively simple interactions. This juxtaposition of emergence and strategy was what made the most sense to me when I was trying to explain the kind of leadership I see in Octavia's books.

17 Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science* (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1992).

18 I first experienced this "inch wide mile deep" language when it was used to speak about the work of the Detroit Future Youth program at Allied Media Projects. I've since heard it used to speak of work that prioritizes depth in community organizing, and understands that meaningful scale depends on deep transformative work, rather than surface widespread work.

19 Confession: As the first daughter of a colonel in the US Army, I cut my political teeth in conversation with my father, who served as the Chief of War Plans while I was in college.

It isn't just that her protagonists are Black, female, or young leaders... Or maybe it is because of all of those things: who leads matters. But what I noticed is that her leaders are adaptive—riding change like dolphins ride the ocean. Adaptive but also intentional, like migrating birds who know how to get where they're going even when a storm pushes them a hundred miles off course.

Humans? Some of us are surviving, following, flocking—but some of us are trying to imagine where we are going as we fly. That is radical imagination.

Octavia's protagonists were also interdependent, often polyamorous. I suspect that Octavia understood from her own feelings of loneliness, desire, and pleasure that the personal is political, and that pleasure evokes change—perhaps more than shame. More precisely, where shame makes us freeze and try to get really small and invisible, pleasure invites us to move, to open, to grow.

At this point, we have all of the information we need to create a change; it isn't a matter of facts. It's a matter of longing, having the will to imagine and implement something else. We are living in the ancestral imagination of others, with their longing for safety and abundance, a longing that didn't include us, or included us as enemy, fright, other.

Octavia played with what emerged from a Black woman or girl—what longings, what pleasure, what communities and connections, what philosophies and divinities. The strategies that played out in Octavia's books included adaptability and interdependence—often through the practice of repeated vulnerability.

Right now there is an organization called Black Organizing for Leadership and Dignity (BOLD), which is cultivating a safe space for Black leaders to practice being vulnerable, being in mutual support, with a goal of countering the usual model of leader isolation.²⁰ We all need a place where we can

20 BOLD is a national Leadership Training Program designed to help rebuild Black (African-American, Caribbean, African, Afro-Latino) social

weep and be held and feel our feelings and figure out how those feelings can direct our next evolution.

I am now part of the training team for BOLD, and I can honestly say that after a period of movement heartbreak and disillusionment, the focus on love and relationship at BOLD is what brought me back to justified and tangible hope, opening up inside me the generosity of time and gifts that is necessary for movements to grow. I wanted to be a part of movement again because it was a pleasure to be in the Black spaces that BOLD was creating.

What amazes me is that, in the space of such constant Black trauma, we get together and celebrate and love on each other, we laugh, we find the pleasure of community, of interdependence. It feels good together.

Octavia's leaders were also decentralized, and they were generative—resilience and solutions came from that decentralization; the collective response was possible because no one person held the power.

Ferguson, Baltimore, Minneapolis, Chicago show us the power of individuals willing to act without a single leader, and their leadership examples are inspiring others to stand up in real time, offline and online, to change legislation and perception.

Octavia was concerned with scale—understanding that what happens at the interpersonal level is a way to understand the whole of society. In many of her books, she shows us how radical ideas spread through conversation, questions, one to one interactions. Social movements right now are also fractal, practicing at a small scale what we most want to see at the universal level. No more growth or scaling up before actually learning through experience.

Rather than narrowing into one path forward, Octavia's leaders were creating more and more possibilities. Not one

justice infrastructure in order to organize Black communities more effectively and to re-center Black leadership in the US social justice movement. More information available at www.boldblackorganizing.org

perfect path forward, but an abundance of futures, of ways to manage resources together, to be brilliant together.

In trying to place Octavia into a context that non-sci fi people could understand, I kept finding resonance in emergence and complex sciences, the ideas that Grace had brought onto my radar. I started to pay more attention to the magic of the world, the small collective creatures who were humble and abundant and resilient.

And now I have become obsessed with how we can be movements like flocks of birds, underground power like whispering mushrooms, the seashell representation of a galactic vision for justice—small patterns that avoid useless predation, spread lessons, and proliferate change.

Emergent strategies let us practice, in every possible way, the world we want to see.

So, ok, but what EXACTLY is emergent strategy?

Emergent Strategy:

- was, initially, a way of describing the adaptive and relational leadership model found in the work of Black science fiction writer Octavia Butler (and others).
- then it grew into plans of action, personal practices and collective organizing tools that account for constant change and rely on the strength of relationship for adaptation. With a crush on biomimicry and permaculture.

Biomimetics or biomimicry is the imitation of the models, systems, and elements of nature for the purpose of solving complex human problems.

Permaculture is a system of agricultural and social design principles centered around simulating or directly utilizing the patterns and features observed in natural ecosystems.

- which evolved into strategies for organizers building movements for justice and liberation that leverage relatively simple interactions to create complex patterns, systems, and transformations—including adaptation, interdependence and decentralization, fractal awareness, resilience and transformative justice, nonlinear and iterative change, creating more possibilities.
- and now it's like...ways for humans to practice being in right relationship to our home and each other, to practice complexity, and grow a compelling future together through relatively simple interactions. Emergent strategy is how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for.
- and maybe, if I'm honest, it's a philosophy for how to be in harmony and love, in and with the world.

a complex movement

over and over again
 it becomes known
 the peace we seek
 is seeking us
 the joy a full bud
 awaiting our attention
 justice in our hands
 longing to be practiced
 the whole world
 learning
 from within
 this thrilling mote in the universe
 laboratory
 labyrinth
 internalize demands
 you are the one

you are waiting for
 externalize love
 bind us together into
 a greater self
 a complex movement
 a generative abundance
 an embodied evolution
 learn to be here
 critique is a seductress
 her door is always open
 so what if you get some
 we are going further
 past reform, to wonder
 this requires comprehension
 that cannot fit in words
 out beyond our children
 beyond the end of time
 there is a ceaseless cycle
 a fractal of sublime
 and we come to create it
 to soil our hands and faces
 loving loving and loving
 ourselves, and all our places

Lineage of Emergent Strategy

Lineage is both important for me to name, and impossible to track. I've come across these concepts in so many ways and places, primarily in the natural world, in my own body, in the development of my nibblings,²¹ in movements (including the Movement for Black Lives and Occupy), in stories of how my paternal grandmother survived and created life in Pendleton, South Carolina, in stories of how my ancestors survived slavery.

21 Yes! A gender-neutral term for the children of my siblings, learned from Chicago-based healer/writer Tanuja Jagernaut.

Every time I have worked with Indigenous communities that have been able to sustain their cultural practices through the onslaught of colonialism and imperialism, as I listen, I hear emergent strategy—being in right relationship with the natural world, learning from the ways change and resilience happen throughout this entire interconnected complex system. Some Indigenous and First Nations friends and teachers have patiently listened to my “discoveries” around being humble in the face of the unknown, listening closely to all that is within and beyond our human ways of knowing. Honoring the changes that come through longing, honoring the very small things that create the largest shifts in the world.

I am the first child of two people who created a large shift for themselves from small actions, actions of love, weighted with the context of their time—a Black man and white woman finding lifelong, life-changing commitment in the context of white supremacy and racism, external and internal. And it was quick—a noticing each other, a flirting without words, talking, laughing, and, four months later, eloping. I showed up a year and a half later. Love overcame racist socialization, creating more possibilities between two people who had been taught the other was dangerous.

After family, there is a certain convergence of thinkers and conversations that has sharpened this particular set of concepts into something I could name and share. Most of this particular lineage happened on worn down couches and over kitchen tables in Detroit from 2008 to 2014.

In 1992, Margaret Wheatley published a book called *Leadership and the New Science*, based on her work with organizations and leaders on what is effective, through a lens of quantum physics, biology, and chaos theory. Her key learnings were that:

- everything is about relationships, critical connections;

- chaos is an essential process that we need to engage;
- the sharing of information is fundamental for organizational success; and
- vision is an invisible field that binds us together, emerging from relationships and chaos and information.

Wheatley has continued developing her thinking on how transformation happens, how communities learn and evolve. She has published a series of books, in which she explores and shares her learning—including how we listen to each other, and what communities around the world are doing to generate life, to generate cooperation and future together. When we met and worked together on a gathering of organizers in Detroit, I got the sense that she’s a little over *Leadership*, so I encourage you to read it for the references—it is a foundational text—and then read everything else she is working on.

Grace Lee Boggs, Detroit-based American revolutionary, my late mentor and friend, read *Leadership* and began to incorporate some of the ideas into speeches and her own writing in the last decade of her one-hundred year, one-hundred day life. As a thinker, I would say Grace was a voracious, efficient beast, and philosophy was her hunting ground. She stayed curious and relevant until the end, asking metaphorical questions on her deathbed. And she was usually ahead of her time—she was creating visionary fiction with Bunyan Bryant in the 1970s.²²

During the years of our mentorship and friendship, Grace would sit in her armchair and encourage everyone who came through her doors to develop as an organic intellectual who could take these concepts into daily life and community work.

22 “Visionary fiction” is a term coined by my Octavia’s Brood: *Science Fiction from Social Justice Movements* co-editor Walidah Imanisha to describe the work of people who use fiction to advance justice and liberation.

Grace taught me dialectical humanism—the cycle of collective transformation of beliefs that occurs as we gather new information and experiences, meaning that, over time, we can understand and hold a position we previously believed to be wrong.²³

In Grace's work, that cycle of transformation was foundational, something to cultivate in young people, in communities. In addition, she resonated with Wheatley's idea that critical connections are more important in a long-term transformation process than critical mass.

Relationships are everything.

Invincible/ill Weaver, a Detroit-based artist-organizer, heard about the book and concepts from Grace, and became a student of emergence, naming their music and media work after the concept and generating an award-winning multi-media interactive album/project called Complex Movements²⁴ around these and other concepts at the intersection of complex science and social justice.

I was reading Black, science fiction writer Octavia Butler's work over and over during that time. I was also visiting and eventually moving to Detroit, in large part due to my relationship with ill. As I've mentioned, I was looking for language and frameworks to use when exploring the kind of leadership Butler's protagonists practiced, and found them in conversations with ill and Grace about emergence—interdependence, iteration, being in relationship with constantly changing conditions, fractals.

23 "Organic intellectuals" comes from Antonio Gramsci and refers to intellectuals outside of traditional academic institutions, intellectuals who develop organically in counter relationship to the dominant culture. For more on Grace's concept of "dialectical humanism"—and its relationship to Karl Marx's dialectical materialism—see the Boggs Center website at <http://www.boggscenter.org/>.

24 Invincible should write a book about emergence—they do much more rigorous research on the science of things than I seem capable of. For more about the amazing work of Complex Movements check out <https://emergencemedia.org/pages/complex-movements>.

Emergence, particularly as it applies to change, was a thrilling match.

ill and I now have a work soulmateship—they are family, a chosen sibling, an idea confidante. Detroit's movement and arts scenes are actually a complex network of such familial relationships, cultivated through sharing resources, loving the city, and conversing as we learn together. I am a nomad who also feels rooted here because of this network.

Wheatley's work speaks of relationship—the depth of relationship between the individuals in a system determines the strength of the system. Butler, Wheatley, ill, Grace, myself, and many others have been growing a strong system of relationships for considering emergence as a game-changing approach to movement work.

Ok, But Who Are You?

Right. I'm Adrienne maree brown. I am an auntie, sister, daughter, woe,²⁵ writer, facilitator, coach, mentor, mediator, pleasure activist, sci-fi scholar, doula, healer, tarot reader, witch, cheerleader, singer, philosopher, queer Black multiracial lover of life living in Detroit.

For this book, I am drawing most heavily on my facilitation, mediation, and coaching experiences—I have been facilitating social justice movement work formally since 2001, and before that, in high school and college, I did student organizing in which I often found myself in what I later came to understand as the facilitation role. Inside of that work I have been asked to mediate everything from organizational beef to break-ups, and have coached people through personal and professional transformation along the way.

25 I learned *woe* from the artist/rapper Drake, and I am deeply grateful for it. Actually, I owe gratitude to the Toronto rapper and producer Devonté who uses it to refer to his crew—who are always "working on excellence." It passed from him to fellow Canadian rapper Drake before I picked up on it. I use this term all the time and thank these men profusely.

I have supported environmental, food, reproductive, gender, economic, and other justice work over the years. At times, I worked formally in organizations that do harm reduction work with active drug users and sex workers, voter organizing at the national level, food justice work in Detroit, and nonviolent direct-action training, primarily supporting Indigenous peoples and other communities directly impacted by climate crisis. I also supported the second US Social Forum as a facilitator. I've held a variety of titles from assistant to coordinator to executive director.

In each movement location I felt inspired by how people can come together for something greater than ourselves, and I felt a yearning for more.

Throughout this path of my jobs, I was always facilitating, within and beyond the organizations I served. At its most fundamental, facilitation is the art of making things easy, making it easier for humans to work together and get things done.

"There is a difference between 'simple' and 'easy.' Simple as in the 'relatively simple interactions' of emergence, easy as in 'facilitation is the art of making things easy.' I don't think they are the same, and I have a hunch the difference might be important and that maybe it should be explicit. Simple means that it boils down to relationships between individual people, objects, beings, truths. Ease has more to do with the amount of friction (or understanding) between the people/objects/truths. And part of what can clear a path to making things easier is to name the simple interactions at play in a complex system."

—Rachel Plattus

I think facilitation is rooted in a certain grand love for life. I've recently realized that I come from a family of facilitators, though everyone wouldn't describe themselves that way.

As I mentioned, my parents are an interracial couple who fell in love in the deep South in the mid-seventies. I am sure I will write their love story one day, but for the purpose of this book it's mostly important to know that both of them had to be able to see something *impossible* (based on the families and society they'd been born into) as not only a *possible* way forward, but as the best way forward.

In their family, work, and community roles over the years, both my parents have shown a natural capacity for leading groups, organizing tasks, making things easier for those around them. They have navigated a wide range of political and economic difference in our extended family.

I have two sisters, both of whom I look to as teachers and confidantes. We are each very different, and yet we all seem to be oriented towards facilitation, consensus, and mediation work.

In our lifetimes, being multiracial has become more common, but navigating other peoples' regressive, fearful, or exoticizing ideas about our identities is one of the ways each member of my immediate family grew this skill set of being able to see what's between, what connects the things that seem separate, the ever-present whole.

I also have to speak here of my evangelical maternal grandfather, Fred Mathis, who facilitated many conversations about Jesus, morality, spirit, faith, and love in his lifetime. Every single time I was in his presence, I was amazed at how quickly we were in a conversation of his choosing, where he was really listening to my child-thoughts about god and love and duty, where I felt I could be honest, even with my doubts, even with my heart. We often differed in opinion, which, with him, felt safe and even invited in a way that it wasn't and hasn't been with most other southern white people. We would talk, and then he would get me on a horse and take me to the woods, asking me intermittently if I understood how

powerful the horse was, how beautiful the land was. Though he was not a fan of my queer sexuality—the only letter I have from him includes scripture and sadness in response to my somewhat impetuous (but accurate) assertion that “I like to sleep with everybody!”—he let me come back to his table and before he left this plane we created room to recognize each other’s humanity and spirituality. I came to understand his fears were rooted in love for me and concern for my eternal soul. He came to understand I was going to find my own way, and that I loved him and was living a life he couldn’t imagine. I learned from him the art of conversation, faith, and silence.

My paternal grandmother, Elouise Brown, died when I was nine. One of my clearest secret memories is that I saw her, impossibly, on a playground, shortly before I learned of her death. As I get older, I think part of her came to me to be carried for a while; I have felt her with me so closely. Most of her lessons have been passed down to me through stories about her, patched together with sparse deep memories of her hands in my hair: her door was always open, there was something to eat, the neighborhood kids knew they could come open her deep freezer for a popsicle. She had seven children of her own. From her I learned that food is an important foundation for community, and that love isn’t always a doorway to forever...sometimes it is a door to another love. Always it is an emergent process.

Among other things, love is an energy of possibility: the possibility of wholeness, in a Platonic understanding. I come from a lineage of brave and radical love, and I don’t think it is an accident that love has been such an overt and active force in my life and that I have come to the conclusion that there is a science of love, a science of transformation and acceptance and gratitude that can help us to be better humans. So I will draw on that love experience as data as much as any other data presented in this book.

Below are some of the other aspects of who I am in this lineage, and what shapes the content gathered here.

Pleasure Activist

I picked up this term from harm reductionist²⁶ Keith Cylar, who I met only briefly before he passed on April 5, 2004 after twenty years of living with HIV. Initially pleasure activism was about claiming our right to experience pleasure, to be safe and respected in the pleasures we choose.

It has expanded for me over the years as I have come to believe that facts, guilt, and shame are limited motivations for creating change, even though those are the primary forces we use in our organizing work. I suspect that to really transform our society, we will need to make justice one of the most pleasurable experiences we can have.²⁷

We also have to stop demonizing pleasure. We try to leverage control over the natural world by making our emotions and sensations less reliable than our thoughts, and then burn at the stake anyone who stays attuned to the ways and power of pleasure in the natural world. It’s counter productive.

Audre Lordé’s essay *The Uses of the Erotic* is foundational writing on the radical act of tuning into pleasure and not settling for less than the erotic sense of wholeness and rightness in one’s life. She is my ancestor in the lineage of this particular work and many others.

I will speak many times of BOLD, the leadership development for Black organizers that is one of my favorite political homes. What we do there is turn and face reality, engage in deep relationship, and love up on each other. It is an organizing space that is also a maroon space, and it is

26 Harm Reduction is an approach to policy and care that reduces the harm that comes from drugs, alcohol, sex and sex work, and other legal and illegal human behaviors. For a good introduction, visit <http://harmreduction.org/about-us/principles-of-harm-reduction/>

27 DJ scholar Lynnée Denise, a core relationship and learning ground in my life, speaks of this as “misery resistance.” She notices the practices, particularly in Black communities, of dancing, singing, and loving as forms of resisting and releasing oppression from the collective Black body.

always a pleasure to enter.²⁸ Every member of BOLD is a teacher of mine.

What we pay attention to grows—this is a hard world, but it is also a world full of love and pleasure. I am of that, attending to and growing that. That, to me, is pleasure activism. I am pretty certain that the next book I write will be on pleasure activism.

Healer/Doula

We all have the capacity to heal each other—healer is a possibility in each of us.

In my experience, healing happens when a place of trauma or pain is given full attention, really listened to. Healing is the resilience instinct of our bodies, a skill we unlearn as we are taught to pay for and rely on data and medicine outside of our own awareness to be well. I have been discovering, or surrendering, to my gifts as a healer. There is a way I can open up my presence, voice, and touch to an energy greater than what my body or life has given me. Then truth, comfort, ease, release, and other healing experiences can flow through, wholeness and acceptance of what is can be felt. I have studied reiki, massage, somatic bodywork, voice healing, tarot, and witchcraft as I have felt my healer capacity emerge.

I place doula here because the work feels the same—a doula, or birth supporter, is specifically a person who supports a pregnant person before, during, and after childbirth. The role was traditionally held by women in the family or community, often working with a midwife or doctor in the process. Childbirth these days is one of the clearest examples

28 "People are constantly creating what we call 'maroon spaces'—free communities, free platforms for thought and expression. I think that that's just in the DNA of Black Atlantic culture.... There's always the imperative towards the emancipated space."—Greg Tate, from an interview with Giovanni Russonello, April 30, 2015, <http://www.capitalbop.com/greg-tate-on-burnt-sugar-afrofuturism-and-the-maroon-spaces-that-music-allows/>.

of humans working against nature—hence the norms of sterile medicated hospital births with a drastic increase in scheduled inductions and unnecessary C-sections.

I learned of these trends away from natural birth when my sister Autumn started having her babies, and she taught me a ton with her choices. I had been asked several times to be a doula and kept saying no, because BLOOD! and the proximity of the words "vagina" and "tear" didn't feel like it was going to work for me.

Then a woman was attacked with a hammer behind my apartment while I was living in Oakland and I was the first to find her and comfort her as she bled and struggled to stay conscious. I saw her strength and aliveness and held it with her until the ambulance came. When she came to thank me a week later we spoke of how we had created a future for her together.

After that experience, and inspired by Autumn, I said yes the next time I was asked to become a doula, learning as an apprentice to Cynthia Jackson in Detroit.²⁹ Eventually I got to be present for the birth of Autumn's third child, and be part of her support during the miscarriage of her fourth child. Life and death are transitions that want to be held gently.

I have now been a doula and birth supporter for several births. The final read through of this book was actually delayed because a dear friend brought a perfect little one into the world and I was her doula and could not look away from the first weeks of that precious being's life.

Beyond birth, I have found doula to be a role that applies to many aspects of life. Birthwork teaches us to engage tension, but not to indulge drama. It is another form of facilitation, making the miraculous experience of birth as easy as

29 Cynthia Jackson grew up in a home of natural birth and many siblings, and has been working as a doula as long as she can remember. She is now working as a home birth midwife and doula in Detroit. More information about her work can be found at <http://www.sacredrosebirthingservices.com/>.

possible, intervening with any systems that make the process harder, helping the family attend to each other and listen to what the body is saying, staying focused on the possibility and wisdom of the body. Standing or sitting with someone as they realize, remember their own wholeness—that is the work of the healer and the doula.

My healing work is just pushing back the external world, making more space for people to feel themselves. Detroit musician/spiritual teacher/friend Sterling Toles told me he considers himself a “dressing room where people can try on their most authentic selves,” and this has been a guiding visual for me when I am engaged in my healing work. As he said in the opening of the 2016 Allied Media Conference, “It’s ok to feel beautiful in the process of creating justice.”

Writer/Artist

My mom says writing came first, and it certainly has been the most consistent kind of work I have done in my life, writing, creating, drawing, singing. I am better at some forms of creating than others, but I enjoy all of it. And I have to write, in some form, every day. It’s how I understand the world.

Toni Cade Bambara, a Black feminist writer-organizer who left lots of wisdom for us, said two things that I turn to when I start to wonder if art is enough of a contribution. On one hand, as I referenced earlier, she said “The role of the artist is to make the revolution irresistible.”³⁰ On the other hand, she said that “Writing is one of the ways I participate in transformation.” From this wisdom combination, I see that I am charged to write about the revolutions I long for, and that any writing I do, even if it isn’t explicitly political, is still a transformative act. I apply this to my songs, my self-portraits, my poems—understanding that when a Black, queer, thick artist woman intentionally takes up space, it creates a new world.

30 Interview by Kay Bonetti, 1982.

Independent Science/Visionary Fiction Scholar

I read sci fi and visionary fiction as political, sacred, and philosophical text, and I engage with others who read it that way. I spent the first part of my life learning what history’s victors wanted to tell me to believe about the past, including the simple assumption that it was the past. I see massive patterns of violence and inequality in history, which perpetuate in the daily news. Science fiction, particularly visionary fiction, is where I go when I need the medicine of possibility applied to the trauma of human behavior. While I have done deep dives in the work of Samuel Delaney, Ursula Le Guin, and others, I started this scholarship in earnest with Octavia. She presented perspectives on the future that were terrifying and compelling, and she took my breath away with her ideas for how to navigate change.

She said:

*all that you touch
you change
all that you change
changes you
the only lasting truth
is change
god is change³¹*

If we accept the scientific and science fictional premise that change is a constant condition of this universe, then it becomes important that we learn to be in right relationship with change.

After much deliberation I have opted not to include a bunch of Butler analysis and spoilers in this book—her work is incredibly strong and clear. If you haven’t read it, feel free to put this book down and go read everything she wrote³² and

31 Butler, *Parable of the Sower*.

32 Including *Survivor*, which was published by Doubleday in 1978 but never reprinted because Octavia didn’t like it, calling it her “*Star Trek* novel.” I think it is a useful read to see her growth and idea formation.

then pick this back up. Warning: I reference her constantly and casually in these pages, as if you have also read the work and know what I am talking about.

That's true of almost everyone I reference—this book is not about analyzing other people's books or work. If you want more, go read the people and books I reference, and then consume the works they reference. I want to move forward from where others ended, or at least from the point of impact between their work and my own.

So Wheatley, Boggs, Butler, my family, my passions—all of these are teachers of emergence for me.

I have also been impressed and developed by the speeches of biomimicry teacher Janine Benyus, the mycelium/mushroom scholar Paul Stametz, the organizing model of Ella Baker, the Toltec worldview presented in *The Four Agreements* by Don Miguel Ruiz, and the *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tzu (particularly the interpretations of Stephen Mitchell and Le Guin).

I have learned that feeling matters, that feeling is an important and legitimate way of knowing. This learning has come most formally through Somatics (particularly the social justice and somatics blend found in generative somatics, through the work of Staci Haines, Spenta Kandawalla, Liu Hoi-man, Lisa Thomas Adeyemo, Chris Lymbertos, Vassilissa Johri, and Richard Strozzi-Heckler), and Robert Gass's work on the art of transformation now developing and evolving into emergent strategies at the Social Transformation Project under the leadership of Jodie Tonita, Eugene Kim, Idelisse Malave, and others.

And *Star Wars* (the force); William Gibson (Idoru); China Mieville (dream shit); Nalo Hopkinson (sensual breathtraking magic); the Zapatistas (many worlds exist); the Black Panthers (meet the biological needs of a community as a mode of organizing); Black feminist artists Audre Lord, June Jordan, Lucille Clifton, and Toni Cade Bambara (create as a form of revolution); and many more.

Early on in my exploration of this kind of work, Marianne Manilov and Alissa Hauser, network cultivators, invited

me to hold a year of community practice with the Engage Network. They and the participants in that year-long journey were also teachers—Anasa Troutman, Kerri Kelly, Jenny Lee, Jodie Tonita, Jane Sung E Bai, Gibran Rivera, Mike Norman, Jidan Koon, and Navina Khanna, thank you.

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

And then there are all the other incredible people whose voices are woven throughout this book and online appendix. They each taught me something about emergent strategy. And there are many more teachers whose voices are not in this book.

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

"Without positive obsession, there is nothing at all."

—Octavia Butler³³

PRINCIPLES OF EMERGENT STRATEGY

In the study and practice of emergent strategy, there are core principles that have emerged and that guide me in learning and using this idea and method in the world. I gather them here with the expectation that they will grow.

Small is good, small is all. (The large is a reflection of the small.)

Change is constant. (Be like water).¹

There is always enough time for the right work.

There is a conversation in the room that only these people at this moment can have.² Find it.

Never a failure, always a lesson.³

1 "You must be shapeless, formless, like water. When you pour water in a cup, it becomes the cup. When you pour water in a bottle, it becomes the bottle. When you pour water in a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Water can drip and it can crash. Become like water my friend," Bruce Lee, *Bruce Lee: A Warrior's Journey* (Warner Home Video, 2000).

2 Idea articulated by Taj James in the cofacilitation of environmental justice resource redistribution initiative Building Equity and Alignment's inaugural meeting in 2013.

3 Rihanna has this concept tattooed on her chest.

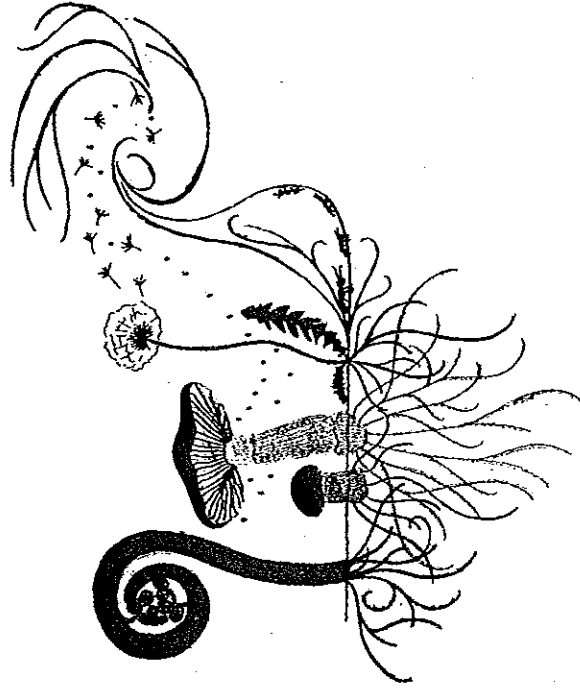
Trust the People. (If you trust the people, they become trustworthy).⁴

Move at the speed of trust.⁵ Focus on critical connections more than critical mass—build the resilience by building the relationships.

Less prep, more presence.

What you pay attention to grows.

ELEMENTS OF EMERGENT STRATEGY



4 This is an inversion of the quote "If you don't trust the people, they become untrustworthy," from Stephen Mitchell's translation, Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988).

5 This is communications strategist Mervyn Marciano's remix of Stephen Covey's "speed of trust" concept.

In both workshops and in writing this book, I've noticed that it's pretty impossible to completely separate any one of the elements of emergent strategy from the others.

Or rather, at the same time, each of these elements is distinct and is totally connected to every other element. When I speak about them, they shift in my mouth. In writing this book, seven elements became six, and they rearranged themselves several times to land in this order. It is not random, but it is not right either—it's just where things landed.

I have seen other people learning about emergence and applying it to human systems and social justice systems in the world as well, and they have made good sense to me.

For example, Complex Movements is a Detroit-based artist collective supporting the transformation of communities by exploring the connections of complex science and social justice movements through multimedia interactive performance work. The Complex Movements crew uses an emblem system with ferns, ants, wavicles, mycelium, and more to engage communities in thinking about the formations and movements of the future.

The particular organization of elements I present here is a snapshot of a theory in perpetual motion. This is the current configuration, which gives me the most space to reflect on my experiences in social justice movements, to invite others into conversation about how we work, and to articulate my longing for something different. One of the ways I was able to identify these was by formulating my critique of the ways that social justice movements have felt, and where my longing for something else was strongest.

Grace often said that every crisis is an opportunity, which is amazing theoretically, and requires great emotional fortitude in practice, as well as the maturity to understand that the negative realization of that theory is "disaster capitalism."²¹

1 Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2008).

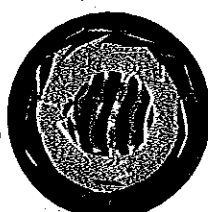
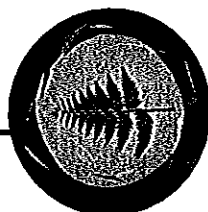
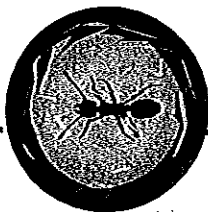
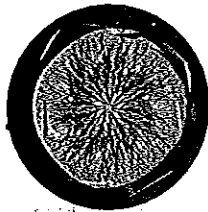
Complex Movements is also studying the relationship between emergence and movements for social justice. Their emblem system is a gorgeous way of learning properties of nature we can apply to our work.

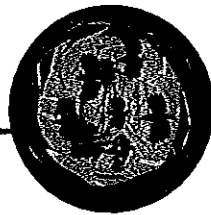
Mycelium is the part of the fungus that grows underground in thread-like formations. It connects roots to one another and breaks down plant material to create healthier ecosystems. Mycelium is the largest organism on earth. Interconnectedness. Remediation. Detoxification.

Ants. Ant societies function through individual ants acting collectively in accord with simple, local information to carry on all of their survival activities. Every ant relies on the work of others in producing their own work. Cooperative work. Collective Sustainability.

Ferns are a form of fractal. A fractal is an object or quantity that displays self-similarity, which means it looks roughly the same at any scale. Small-scale solutions impact the whole system. Use similar principles to build at all scales.

The Wavicle, or wave-particle duality, suggests that all objects exhibit both wave and particle properties. Between observations as it evolves on its own, it behaves like a wave; distributed across space, exploring different intermingling paths to all possible destinations. However, when its location or speed is measured, it appears definite and concrete, like a particle. Its wave nature gives this measurement a curious property: the more certain we are about either speed or position, the more uncertain we become about the other. Uncertainty/doubt. Valuing both process and outcome.





Starlings. *The synchronized movement patterns of a starling flock is also known as a murmuration. Guided by simple rules, starling murmurations can react to their environment as a group without a central leader orchestrating their choices; in any instant, any part of the flock can transform the movement of the whole flock. Collective leadership/ partnership. Adaptability.*



Dandelions. *The dandelion flower head can change into a white, globular seed head overnight. Each seed has a tiny parachute that allows it to spread far and wide in the wind. The entire plant has medicinal properties. Dandelions are often mistakenly identified as weeds, aggressively removed, but are hard to uproot; the top is pulled but the long taproot remains. Resilience. Regeneration. Decentralization.*

Sitting with the questions of how I could transform some of the heartbreak I have experienced in nonprofit work into lessons that could offer other paths forward, I found that part of the opportunity was to pay deeper attention to how the natural world has solved these same problems. I do believe that what we pay attention to grows, so I wanted to stop growing the crises, the critique. The elements in this book are a way to shift my attention to the positive, to what I want to grow.

I like the word *biomimicry*, and I love knowing that the practices of mimicking the natural world have been happening since humans came into existence. This is actually an ancient practice, a recovery rather than a discovery.

"Biomimicry is basically taking a design challenge and then finding an ecosystem that has already

solved that challenge, and literally trying to emulate what you learn. There are three types of biomimicry—one is copying form and shape, another is copying a process, like photosynthesis in a leaf, and the third is mimicking at an ecosystem's level, like building a nature-inspired city."

—Janine Benyus

The elements I explore reference aspects of the natural world operating at each of these levels, though the bulk of examples aim at the systems and processes.

For each of these elements, we spiral from the simple understanding to the more complex ways of thinking about applying the element to our movement work. I define what the element is according to a dictionary, point out some of the places we see this element in nature, then offer up writing I've done on the element, moving from the personal through organizational to movement or collective levels. Towards the end is a brief assessment tool you can use to reflect on how much emergent strategy is showing up in your life and work. Then I share some of the emergent strategy practices and tools I have worked with to create tangible differences in movement work.

I'll add this because of some of the doubt I've seen people experience when approaching these concepts—some people are more comfortable with emergent strategy than others, but I don't think this has to do with personality or intelligence. We are already emergent beings, just by our very existence. But we've been tricked away from it.

Nature vs. nurture is part of this—and then there is what I think of as anti-nurturing—the ways we in a western/US context are socialized to work against respecting the emergent processes of the world and each other:

- We learn to disrespect Indigenous and direct ties to land.

- We learn to be quiet, polite, indirect, and submissive, not to disturb the status quo.
- We learn facts out of context of application in school. How will this history, science, math show up in our lives, in the work of growing community and home?
- We learn that tests and deadlines are the reasons to take action. This puts those with good short-term memories and a positive response to pressure in leadership positions, leading to urgency-based thinking, regardless of the circumstance.
- We learn to compete with each other in a scarcity-based economy that denies and destroys the abundant world we actually live in.
- We learn to deny our longings and our skills, and to do work that occupies our hours without inspiring our greatness.
- We learn to manipulate each other and sell things to each other, rather than learning to collaborate and evolve together.
- We learn that the natural world is to be manicured, controlled, or pillaged to support our consumerist lives. Even the natural lives of our bodies get medicated, pathologized, shaved or improved upon with cosmetic adjustments.
- We learn that factors beyond our control determine the quality of our lives—something as random as which skin, gender, sexuality, ability, nation, or belief system we are born into sets a path for survival and quality of life.
- In the United States specifically, though I see this most places I travel, we learn that we only have value if we can produce—only then do we earn food, home, health care, education.
- Similarly, we learn our organizations are only as successful as our fundraising results, whether the community impact is powerful or not.

- We learn as children to swallow our tears and any other inconvenient emotions, and as adults that translates into working through red flags, value differences, pain, and exhaustion.
- We learn to bond through gossip, venting, and destroying, rather than cultivating solutions together.
- Perhaps the most egregious thing we are taught is that we should just be really good at what's already possible, to leave the impossible alone.

Lots of people and organizations have been and are critical of these ways we socialize each other, and have offered solutions—I think here of Harriet Tubman, Ella Baker, Frantz Fanon, Karl Marx, Augusto Boal, Malcolm X, the Zapatistas, and others throughout history who I believe have felt the thrum of emergence in their systems and moved what was possible in their lifetimes such that their impacts reverberate in my life and the work of my generation.

We are still mostly misdirected, turned away from the wisdom that is our inheritance. Joanna Macy speaks of the “great turning,” a collective awakening and shifting direction, away from the wanton destruction of this planet and each other, away from those practices of separation and competition listed above, towards life and abundance.² I like this visual of turning and evolving, as opposed to destroying the systems in place now.

When Wheatley visited Detroit on a learning journey, she said systems built on greed eventually collapse on themselves, topple under their own top-heavy weight.

Matter doesn't disappear, it transforms. Energy is the same way. The Earth is layer upon layer of all that has existed, remembered by the dirt. It is time to turn capitalism into a fossil, time to turn the soil, turn to the horizon together.

² To learn more about Joanna Macy's work, I recommend visiting her website, <http://www.joannamacy.net/thegreatturning.html>.

If, as you are engaging these elements, a clearer framework appears, or an additional piece, that's good news. Let's all be conduits of the wisdom of this planet. I think any efforts to engage the emergent brilliance of our world will help with this turning, will help with liberating humanity from its current role as a virus Earth should shake off.

So, without further ado, the elements:

Element	Nature of Element
Fractal	The Relationship Between Small and Large
Adaptive	How We Change
Interdependence and Decentralization	Who We Are and How We Share
Non-linear and Iterative	The Pace and Pathways of Change
Resilience and Transformative Justice	How We Recover and Transform
Creating More Possibilities	How We Move Towards Life

FRACTALS:

the relationship between small and large

A fractal is a never-ending pattern. Fractals are infinitely complex patterns that are self-similar across different scales. They are created by repeating a simple process over and over in an ongoing feedback loop.

grounding in nature

"The micro reflects the macro and vice versa—Fibonacci patterns show up from space to cauliflower. The tiniest, most mundane act reflects the biggest creations we can imagine."

—Kat Aaron

Tune in to the prevalence of spiral in the universe—the shape in the prints of our fingertips echoes into geological patterns, all the way to the shape of galaxies. Then notice that the planet is full of these fractals—cauliflower, yes, and broccoli, ferns, deltas, veins through our bodies, tributaries, etc.—all of these are

echoes of themselves at the smallest and largest scales. Dandelions contain an entire community in each spore that gets blown on children's breath.

How we are at the small scale is how we are at the large scale. The patterns of the universe repeat at scale. There is a structural echo that suggests two things: one, that there are shapes and patterns fundamental to our universe, and two, that what we practice at a small scale can reverberate to the largest scale.

I first became aware of fractals in 2004 when I was doing electoral organizing, though I didn't have the word for it. We were trying to impact the federal election, to get George W. Bush out of office. And what I saw clearly was that, at a local level, we—Americans—don't know how to do democracy. We don't know how to make decisions together, how to create generative compromises, how to advance policies that center justice. Most of our movements are reduced to advancing false solutions, things we can get corporate or governmental agreement on, which don't actually get us where we need to be. It was and is devastatingly clear to me that until we have some sense of how to live our solutions locally, we won't be successful at implementing a just governance system regionally, nationally, or globally.

This awareness led me to look at organizations more critically. So many of our organizations working for social change are structured in ways that reflect the status quo. We have singular charismatic leaders, top down structures, money-driven programs, destructive methods of engaging conflict, unsustainable work cultures, and little to no impact on the issues at hand. This makes sense; it's the water we're swimming in. But it creates patterns. Some of the patterns I've seen that start small and then become movement wide are:

- Burn out. Overwork, underpay, unrealistic expectations.
- Organizational and movement splintering.
- Personal drama disrupting movements.
- Mission drift, specifically in the direction of money.
- Stagnation—an inability to make decisions.

These patterns emerge at the local, regional, state, national, and global level—basically wherever two or more social change agents are gathered. There's so much awareness around it, and some beautiful work happening to shift organizational cultures. And this may be the most important element to understand—that *what we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system.*

Grace articulated it in what might be the most-used quote of my life: "*Transform yourself to transform the world.*" This doesn't mean to get lost in the self, but rather to see our own lives and work and relationships as a front line, a first place we can practice justice, liberation, and alignment with each other and the planet.

In my own life this understanding has created major shifts. Once upon a time I was a burnt out executive director, tied to my technology and my sense of my own importance. When I was with friends, family, lovers, I was still working. I thought I was awesome at multitasking. I would say urgency, obligation, and specialness were the driving forces in my life. I was using food, drink, sex, and work to numb my way through life. My work was reactive; there was often a sense of time scarcity and sprinting, of hopelessness, of not being appreciated, feeling no trust, of working with a confused vision.

My family intervened in a variety of ways, primarily by noticing aloud how little they felt me. I had gotten this feedback from others as well, that when I wasn't "on" it was hard to *feel* me. When I was "on" I could fill a room.

My coworkers also let me know how frustrating it was to work with me when I was so clearly unhappy.

In 2012 I took a sabbatical, and I realized that I wasn't upholding my end of the sacred bargain: My life is a miracle that cannot be recreated. I can never get these hours, weeks, years back. In a fractal conception, I am a cell-sized unit of the human organism, and I have to use my life to leverage a shift in the system by *how* I am, as much as with the things I do. This means actually being in my life, and it means bringing my values into my daily decision making. Each day should be lived on purpose.

This has meant increasing my intentionality about being with others. Adapting to the changes of life, yes, but with a clear and transparent intention to keep deepening with my loved ones and transforming together.

I struggle with putting the phone/devices down like most people in my generation or younger, but I am learning to savor the quality of time spent without them, in real life with other people, with my writing, being present. Or using the Internet and cellular data to build trust and connection, rather than to echo chamber deconstruction and destruction.

It has meant getting in touch with my body and feelings in real time, and learning to express them. I am learning to engage in generative conflict, to say no, to feel my limits, taking time to feel my heartache when it comes—from living in America, from interpersonal trauma or grief, from movement losses.

It has meant learning to work collaboratively, which goes against my inner "specialness." I am socialized to seek achievement alone, to try to have the best idea and forward it through the masses. But that leads to loneliness and, I suspect, extinction. If we are all trying to win, no one really ever wins.

I am beginning to revel in the increased capacity that comes from working with and trusting others. I sleep, I center, I travel, I share. I have offered more room in my life to love, family, creating. Each day I feel more authentic, and more capable. I don't experience failure much these days; I experience growth.

I have increased my practices of collaboration and storytelling as ways to share analysis, engaging and facilitating deep small transformations that pick up and echo each other towards a tipping point, organizing based in love and care rather than burnout and competition.

At a collective level, this is the invitation to practice the world we wish to see in the current landscape. Yes, resist the onslaught of oppression, but measure our success not just by what we stop, but by how many of us feel, and can say:

I am living a life I don't regret
A life that will resonate with my ancestors,¹
and with as many generations forward as I can
imagine.

I am attending to the crises of my time with
my best self,

I am of communities that are doing our collec-
tive best
to honor our ancestors and all humans to
come.

It's lifework, with benefits. I regularly check in with my vision for our collective future and make adjustments on how I am living, what I am practicing, to be aligned with that future, to make it more possible.

That's a little testifying and spell casting on how fractal work feels on a personal level. Here are two explorations of it in organizing work—couching fractals in the idea of what movements need today followed by a piece about how

1 Mary Hooks of Southerners on New Ground and #blacklivesmatter Atlanta offers a mandate for Black people that moves me as I build towards this life of no regrets: "To avenge the suffering of my ancestors, to earn the respect of future generations, and to be transformed in the service of the work." I have been using this mandate in my work for Black liberation (<http://southernersonnewground.org/2016/07/themandate/>).

Ruckus, a small and mighty organization, shifted its practices to be aligned with its values.

"The only way to deal with an unfree world is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion."
—Albert Camus

Notes from "Intersecting Worlds:
The One We've Got, The One We're Building, The Ones We
Imagine"²

My vision is changing our *how*, more than seeing clearly our *what*. I see a how where we are all much more comfortable with change, and with our personal power to change conditions.

Some people are comfortable believing—in heaven, in socialism, in someone else's thinking. That's never quite worked for me. I learn experientially. I am so far only convinced that change is divine and constant.

Octavia Butler said, "Belief initiates and guides action—Or it does nothing."³ In her twelve novels and her short stories, she created case studies that teach how to lead inside of change, shaping change. I've been calling what I learn from her work emergent strategy. Based in the science of emergence, it's relational, adaptive, fractal, interdependent, decentralized, transformative. I'm applying it in facilitation and organizational development work.

- 2 This section is based on notes I wrote before a keynote panel at the New Economy Coalition's CommonBound conference in June 2014. My fellow panelists were Gar Alperovitz and Gopal Dayaneni, and we were facilitated by Rachel Platruss. You can see the whole discussion at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n0e19jJRgYk>.
- 3 Butler, *Parable of the Sower*.

It unleashes more of the power of each person. Because some are comfortable deferring the work of vision to others—or being the visionary talkers (I am guilty of being a visionary talker for years! Forgive me.⁴) I think, and have been gathering proof in sci fi writing workshops with organizers and activists, that we each have important pieces of the whole, so I concentrate my work on the generation of vision, the strengthening of the muscle of looking forward together.

One major emerging lesson: We have to create futures in which everyone doesn't have to be the same kind of person. That's the problem with most utopias for me: they are presented as mono value, a new greener more local monoculture where everyone gardens and plays the lute and no one travels... And I don't want to go there!⁵

Compelling futures have to have more justice, yes; and right relationship to planet, yes; but also must allow for our growth and innovation. I want an interdependence of lots of kinds of people with lots of belief systems, *and* continued evolution.

Right now we don't know what's right so much as we know what's wrong, and what we've tried. And based on how constantly surprised I still am by life every day, I suspect that will likely continue to be the case, and hopefully, perpetually resolving these major issues continues to be interesting. My mentor Grace Lee Boggs is still curious on the eve of her ninety-ninth birthday, so I'm hopeful.

Nothing that has existed so far was the right way for everyone, but there are pieces out there we can begin to imagine together. This is why Gar Alperovitz's writing speaks to me—what's between capitalism and socialism?⁶ Because whatever

- 4 See "Confessions of a Charismatic Leader" later in this book.
- 5 Paraphrasing Liz Lemon, *30 Rock* (NBC, 2011).
- 6 To read more about Gar Alperovitz's exploration of the space between capitalism and socialism, visit <http://garalperovitz.com/ifyoudontlike/>.

we build will stand on the foundations of those economic experiments. This is why Gopal Dayaneni's work appeals to me—what are the strategies we need to learn, with appropriate fear and wonder, to move our movements into right relationship with the planet? Let's learn.

I want a future where we are curious, interested, visionary, adaptive.

The community in Detroit, to which I am still a newcomer, has been in transition for decades. We are learning about tolerating, even recently—a few years ago foundations were investing in us, now they aren't as much, and it has impact. Generally we have to let go of the success that we feel, as individuals and organizations, when capitalism works for us.

Gopal convinced me years ago that we need to have a level of dystopian consideration. Certain climate realities are no longer wild imaginings, they are happening, and they are coming. (*Game of Thrones* watchers? Winter is here, and it's balmy.) Octavia Butler appeals to me because she wanted to prepare us for inevitable consequences of human behavior.

That is the context in which I enter this conversation. I don't have answers, but I am sitting with these questions:

Change is coming—what do we need to imagine as we prepare for it?

What is compelling about surviving climate change?

What is a just transition economy?⁷ What is an economy for the phase of transition from this way of relating to Earth and resources, to the way we might relate on a watered Earth, or a frozen Earth?

⁷ To read more about Gopal Dayaneni's work with the other brilliant members of the Movement Generation team, visit <http://movementgeneration.org/>.

⁸ Movement Generation taught me that *economy* simply means the management of home, of the resources of home. A functional economy is a universal concern.

How do we prepare not just for suffering, but for sharing and innovation?

How do we resource the local and still honor our nomadic tendency, our natural migration patterns (which we deny by trying to stay in only one place), our global interconnectedness?

How do we prepare the children in our lives to be visionary, and to love nature even when the changes are frightening and incomprehensible? To be abundant when what we consider valuable is shifting from gold to collar greens?

How do we articulate a compelling economic vision to sustain us through the unimaginable, to unite us as things fall apart?

How do we experience our beauty and humanity in every condition?

These are the questions that sustain my work. I believe all of you hold answers.

We hone our skills of naming and analyzing the crises. I learned in school how to *deconstruct*—but how do we move beyond our beautiful deconstruction? Who teaches us to reconstruct?

How do we cultivate the muscle of radical imagination needed to dream together beyond fear? Showing Black and white people sitting at a lunch counter together was science fiction.

We need to move from competitive ideation, trying to push our individual ideas, to collective ideation, collaborative ideation. It isn't about having the number one best idea, but having ideas that come from, and work for, more people.

When we speak of systemic change, we need to be fractal. Fractals—a way to speak of the patterns we see—move from the micro to macro level. The same spirals on sea shells can be found in the shape of galaxies. We must create patterns that cycle upwards. We are microsystems. (We each hold contradictions—my shellac nails vs. my desire that no one do the toxic work of nail painting, my family travel vs. my

desire not to use fossil fuels, etc.). Our friendships and relationships are systems. Our communities are systems. Let us practice upwards.

And then—what happens when we succeed? New problems? Detroit filmmaker Oya Amakisi once shared with me the words of General Baker, a Detroit labor organizer and leader, who said, “You keep asking how do we get the people here? I say, what will we do when they get here?”

Maya Angelou’s “On the Pulse of Morning” feels incredibly relevant here today:

Each new hour holds new chances

For new beginnings.

Do not be wedded forever

To fear, yoked eternally

To brutishness.

The horizon leans forward,

Offering you space to place new steps of change⁹.

Transforming Ruckus: Actions Speak Louder¹⁰

I am going to tell you a story about one organization’s transformation from good intentions to good practice. The setting is the US social and environmental justice movement.

I was the executive director of The Ruckus Society for four and a half years, starting in 2006. Ruckus has historically been the kind of organization that wouldn’t be described as feminist. Founded in 1996 on the model of Greenpeace action camps—get a hundred activists in the woods and show

9 Maya Angelou, *On the Pulse of Morning: The Inaugural Poem* (New York: Random House, 1993).

10 This was first published in *The Scholar and Feminist Online* Issue 8.3 (Summer 2010), http://sfoline.barnard.edu/polyphonic/brown_01.htm.

them how to do non-violent civil disobedience in an effective way—Ruckus was rooted in a masculine action culture.

The best way I can explain this culture is penetrative. Rather than forming long-term partnerships with communities, Ruckus was in and out with mind-blowing, creative actions. This was in line with a model of action grounded in spectacle. The politics were radical and the actions historic, but there wasn’t a sense of community ownership or engagement in the work—which meant that at a fundamental level the power dynamic wasn’t changing. The communities still come to rely on someone else to change their situation.

Over years of amazing work, coupled with critiques about the approach, Ruckus went through what could perhaps be called labor pains to bring forth the model and structure we currently have—which includes a team of women, majority queer, at the staff level.

The frustrations folks had with Ruckus are very much the frustrations alive in our movements right now—we had a vision for the kind of world we wanted to see, but we weren’t modeling that internally. We wanted strong local economies where communities felt responsible for their neighbors’ well being, but Ruckus wasn’t actually developing local direct action know-how.

Out of this moment in our history, a new program was born that transformed how we worked. It was called the Indigenous People’s Power Project (IP3). The model was to build a body of Indigenous organizers who became action experts within their own communities. In the process of getting this project off the ground, Ruckus was challenged to grow into something we couldn’t even have imagined.

We grew an immense amount.

I was honored to be a part of The Ruckus Society during this labor, this awakening, watching over a transition born of frustrations and critiques as well as an instinct that something better was possible.

We had to begin to practice deep, authentic collaboration. This meant a shift in how we move financial and human

resources—there are enough people out there to support the movement(s) we need, but currently, organizations are pitted against each other to access money (less and less money), rather than creating and investing together to maximize a diversity of resources from money, to people, to spaces, to skills. Because we are not investing in a shared network of resources, it is easy to let structural and ideological particularities create deep splits throughout the non-profit sphere, rendering much of our work useless.

We couldn't continue that—we had to figure out what humility looked like on all sides in order to truly collaborate. This included making room on our board for folks in the IP3 program, shifting timelines to meet community needs, with folks on all sides being able to say we didn't know how to do this, and recommitting over and over, even when it seemed too hard to continue.

One thing that was highlighted for us was that, in the direct action realm, it's not unusual to see time and energy poured into actions that are more interesting/funny/creative than they are compelling to those we are trying to reach and/or life-changing to the communities taking action. To be clear, we are moving in a good direction in being funny and creative—we want to engage people—but our standards for communities taking the risks associated with direct action must be that the experience and the results are compelling, even life-changing.

We also learned a lot about breaking down the walls between different issue areas. Indigenous communities present a clear case of economic and environmental hardship, with residents highly recruited for the military, dealing with high levels of drug and alcohol dependence and a high rate of suicide. Through this lens it's easy to see that just coming with one piece of analysis wouldn't serve the big picture.

For successful movements, we need to develop strong, action-oriented communities that understand that their analysis and work cannot be limited to one struggle. Together, we must be advancing the frontline of our vision for a

sustainable, just world. Our strategies must be more sophisticated and engaging than those of our opposition.

We learned that every member of the community holds pieces of the solution, even if we are all engaged in different layers of the work.

We learned to look for telltale signs that actions were community based. One indicator that things are off is when impacted communities and people of color get involved and they are put in the role of "performing the action," for example, having their photos taken, being spokespeople, or being asked to endorse or represent work they don't get to lead, etc., while most of the background organizing is still dominated by the folks who aren't impacted and won't be around long term to sustain the campaign or to be held accountable.

At its worst, this approach builds up hope and encourages local communities to take risks, and then abandons them with the results.

At its best, there is a moment of victory. But too often, in spite of their best intentions, those who aren't directly impacted only see the surface layer(s) of the impact, and thus come up with surface solutions that don't address the deep-seated multi-pronged need in the community.

We learned that in organizing and relationships, accountability is key for building a lasting base; when folks see change, they feel their own investment is worthwhile. We need actions that build our base, because we must reach a tipping point of folks who are on the side of justice before we reach the peak of what our planet can provide.

To be transparent, while Ruckus was in the midst of this transition, I didn't think of it as a transition from a patriarchal organization to a feminist organization any more than I thought of it as a white organization becoming an organization for people of color. I thought of our story as moving from a reactionary, surface-change direct-action organization to vision-based, systemic-change-oriented direct-action organization. But all of the above happened.

Along the way we began to practice principles that felt necessary and powerful to articulate:

- Ruckus comes where we're called, respecting local work and building long-term relationships of support. We reach out to and build relationships with groups we respect, to lay the groundwork for being called to frontline work. We do not insert ourselves into people's political or community work.
- Ruckus supports action when the community most impacted by a political, social, economic, or environmental injustice is the leader of the strategy, vision, and action.
- Ruckus supports action that builds strength and holds space for a strong community vision.
- In a successful Ruckus action, the visions and solutions are deeper and more compelling than the injustice. (We are calling for a movement-wide shift away from action that isn't grounded in a vision of deep systemic change, as that ultimately is a misuse of our time and energy.)
- We submit that no social movement in history has successfully transformed its society without direct action, and we at Ruckus recognize our historical significance and the need for our work in the movement at this time. However, the actions that have had the most impact were uniquely suited to the time, place, and political conditions. We feel the movement has gotten stuck in a tactical rut and that it's time to leap out with actions that address our current political conditions directly.
- "Transform yourself to transform the world."—Grace Lee Boggs. We aim to be an organizational model of the change we call for in the world.

Now, in hindsight, I can see how we have transformed ourselves in a way that makes our work much more relevant

as a living resistance to the dysfunctional social system in which we live. Within our small organization we have grown from a kickass, majority white, male-led environmental-issue-centered network into a kickass, female-led, multicultural, justice- AND environment-centered network.

We lovingly embrace those who brought the skills before us, and those to come, as part of the same fierce family of fearless activists with lifelong commitments to societal transformation. We are intentional about living our vision in terms of how we operate as a community in order to bring vision-based support to the movement we love. We opt for self-determination and sustainability in everything from our structure to our budgets to our programs.

We have learned that such a fundamental shift requires many small steps—having massive visions and making them attainable with specific goals that can be measured and felt both internally and by those who participate in the network and in our trainings.

We have also learned that we had to lay out our operating beliefs. Each person has a set of beliefs with which they move through the world. These are formed by their cultural, social, economic, and environmental (amongst others) experiences from birth, and they change as more experiences are added to the whole.

A group joins their beliefs together creating a set of named or unnamed ways in which they operate. We have made our beliefs very transparent at Ruckus. What we landed on was that, for the next period of history, we need to place an emphasis on:

- Impacted leadership (the leadership of communities directly impacted by economic and environmental injustice);
- Privileged support (the intentional support for impacted leadership from communities/people that can identify their privilege and want to see a rebalancing of power);

- Feminine leadership (not just women leaders, but leaders who shift our understanding of how power can be held).

These beliefs are partly grounded in the reality that leadership from these spheres is directly opposite to the leadership we've experienced for the last century and it's time for balance, and also because the most exciting organizing happening today is coming from communities directly impacted by oppressions and injustices.

As an organization, The Ruckus Society's operating principles include the "Jemez Principles" and the "Environmental Justice Principles." These principles mean we move towards our vision of sustainability and self-determination through organizing that values natural operating systems, understanding the power of uncovering the root causes of problems, and asking, "What are the root problems in my community, and what do deep, foundational, rooted solutions look like?" This is thinking from a place of healing, more than dominating others with our beliefs.

It is not enough to adhere to these values, however—we want to see our beliefs in practice.

Now, how does it feel?

Being a part of this team has been incredible. We have experienced what it's like to release any assumption that one person has all the skills needed to lead and support the work. That release—a huge relief to me personally—allowed us to begin to really weave together our strengths, rather than facing the limitations of relying on one leader to hold the vision, coordination, fundraising, and programmatic work of the group. It has allowed us to face our own personal limitations with transparency and curiosity, noting where we want to grow and not being afraid to ask for feedback.

On an average day, it feels like an extremely functional organization working for change. On the best days, it feels like the world we are trying to create, and it is marvelous.

INTENTIONAL ADAPTATION:

how we change

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

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

grounding in nature

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

—Sierra Pickett