

“THE GOAL OF VISIONARY FICTION IS TO CHANGE THE WORLD”

• Interview with Walidah Imarisha •

By *Sur Journal* and Bruno Oliveira

All political articulation is science fiction. For educator, writer, Stanford University professor, and poet Walidah Imarisha, this observation indicates to us that the task of reconfiguring the world in more just and collective ways necessarily involves an exercise in (re)imagination. If we have the capacity to imagine a world without prisons, without police violence, where all people have access to their rights and are free from the historical abuses, then we are talking about a world that does not currently exist. To dream it collectively, in practice, means “build a future where the fantastic liberates the mundane.”¹ This dream, according to Imarisha, confabulates what she calls visionary fiction, or radical science fiction:

Visionary fiction offers social justice movements a process to explore creating those new worlds (although not a solution – that’s where sustained mass community organizing comes in). I came up with the term “visionary fiction” to encompass the fantastical cross-genre creations that help us bring about those new worlds. This term reminds us to be utterly unrealistic in our organizing, because it is only through imagining the so-called impossible that we can begin to concretely build it. When we free our imaginations, we question everything.²

In 2015, Imarisha published, along with visionary political movement strategist adrienne maree brown, Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories From Social Justice Movements. The book, so named after black feminist science fiction writer Octavia Butler (1947-2006), is a collection of radical science fiction that collectively explores the connections between radical speculative fiction and social change movements.

In this interview for Sur Journal, Imarisha discusses the social transformation potential of visionary fiction, and elaborates in what ways the imagination of better-and possible-worlds is at the heart of the struggle for human rights, among other reasons, for transformation-oriented action. As Octavia Butler herself aptly put it in Parable of the Sower, "All that you touch / You change."

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Sur Journal • Tell us a little about yourself and your personal and professional trajectory.

Walidah Imarisha • My name is Walidah Imarisha. I am a writer and educator living in the USA. Most of my historical work looks at Black history, and I work with and study current social movements for justice. A large area of my work looks at what I call visionary fiction or radical science fiction that can help us dream better about more just futures and build them into existence. For me, that is fundamentally tied to radical organizing, community organizing and liberation work in the community.

Sur • How did you get into fiction as a literary genre? And what was your encounter with Octavia Butler like?

W.I. • I've always loved science fiction and other fantastical spaces. My mom was a huge Star Trek fan and so, I grew up watching Star Trek. My oldest memory is watching Star Trek when I was 2. It was always a very big part of my life. And looking back, it's clear that I was drawn to it because of the space of imagination, because anything was possible, because I didn't know what was going to happen and that was exciting. I also wrote my own fantasy and science fiction stories as a kid. But certainly, in mainstream science fiction, I didn't see myself or Black people reflected much. In Star Trek, I always felt much closer to Mr. Spock than many of the human characters (other than Uhura, of course) because he was marked as other, as alien, and that certainly felt closer to how I felt as a Black child.

I was very lucky to have encountered Octavia E. Butler's work while I was still in high school. I would go to the second-hand bookstore and just look through the science

fiction section, at the covers, and choose new books by people I didn't know. I found her book "Kindred" and on the cover, there were two Black women's faces, kind of in motion. That was the first time I had seen a Black woman on the cover of a science fiction book and so, I grabbed that one. They also had "Parable of the Sower" and I bought both. That was absolutely foundational because it is the place that I saw in practice the principles of what I would later call visionary fiction. It was the first place I saw in science fiction that connection of identity, that questioning of power and creating new relationships to power, which, for me, are the key parts of visionary fiction. Definitely, reading all of Octavia's work that I could get my hands on was part of what led me to realize that these things didn't have to be separate, because before I had mostly engaged with the imaginings of white cis men.

As I got older and got involved in radical organizing, I felt like I needed to hide that side of myself, the nerd side, because it wasn't serious. And luckily, I went through a process where I found other radical nerds and came to the place where I realized that not only is it okay to like science fiction as a person involved in radical change, but it's imperative. You need it. I started working with folks specifically around a radical magazine that was based in the US called *Left Turn Magazine*. We did an issue – the Visionary Fiction issue – that I guest edited, and that was the first time I used the term visionary fiction to describe radical science fiction. And then, from there, I got to meet my Octavia's Brood co-editor, adrienne maree brown, actually as part of that issue, and a couple of years later, we started working on "Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories From Social Justice Movements".

When I was editing the issue of *Left Turn*, someone said, "Oh, do you know adrienne's work? You have to connect with her". We actually didn't meet in person until after a year of working on "Octavia's Brood" together. We did it all virtually. But we both did a workshop at the US Social Forum in 2010: adrienne's was "Octavia Butler & Emergent Strategy" and mine was "Visionary Fiction", which I co-facilitated with Morigan Phillips. We co-facilitated them and they were 2 of the most popular workshops, which was lovely. And adrienne said, "This speaks to the fact that our movements really want more of this. So, we should do a book." And I said, "Let's do a book."

SUR • How can imagination, collective dreaming and visionary fiction become tools for building possible futures? What is the role of collectivity and community organizing in these processes?

W.I. • I work to make that very clear with visionary fiction. adrienne and I both chose science fiction because it is a space of imagination, which means people are willing to go with anything. For me, as a prison abolitionist, I've found science fiction or the space of imagination a perfect one because people in the "real world" cannot imagine a world without prisons. We have all been conditioned to think that it is impossible. But if you move them to a completely different planet, and you say, "Anything can

happen here that we can dream up. These are not humans. This has nothing to do with us," I have found people will be open to so many things. And it's interesting because in those spaces, when I've said, "Well, what will people do? You've now created these green aliens with purple polka dots on another planet. What will they do when one of them hurts another one? Do you think that they would publicly want to punish them? Do you think they would want to put them in a box? Do you think they would want to shut them off from everyone else for years and then bring them back and continue to punish them?" When you frame it that way, people go, "Of course not! God! That's awful! No, they wouldn't do that. They would want to fix what was hurt." They instantly go to transformative justice, to abolitionist principles of creating community.

It's important to have those spaces, but those spaces have to be brought back to this world. You can't leave people there because if you do, it's very easy to have complete cognitive dissonance, a complete break with that imagined world and the real world. We see that with things like in 2014, in the United States, during the Ferguson Uprisings, when Mike Brown, a Black teenager was murdered by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri while Brown's hands were in the air. This ignited Black resistance across the US. There were all kinds of protests and demonstrations constantly, especially in Ferguson. Some escalated to direct action or property destruction after police attacked peaceful protestors with tanks and militarized weapons. Around the same time, the "Hunger Games" movie, "Mockingjay Part 1," was in theatres - where they're rising up, blowing up power stations and engaging in armed resistance. And white people in the US reacted like, "Yeah! Go! Take the Capitol down!" And those same people were responding to Black folks' resistance by saying, "Why are these Black people tearing up their communities? What is wrong with them? This is not how you do it." And I think that this kind of disconnect is an inherent danger. There is an inherent danger in these mainstream science fiction projects that appropriate the condition of Blackness, of oppression, but put white people in that role, because it's then easy to empathize with Katniss, who is played by Jennifer Lawrence, a white woman, but you cannot have that same empathy for Black folks.

When I started, I thought that inherently, visionary fiction was about moving and doing the work of creating new futures. I thought we all understood we were dreaming so that we would be doing, but I realized that this is not the case for people who encounter it without a foundation in movement work and community organizing. I have definitely worked to be more explicit, to explicitly say it is anti-capitalist, it is non-hierarchical. We're creating collective power. We're making decisions together. This is not a thought experiment. So, I have worked to try and spell out much more clearly that this is an engaged process and if you are not doing the work of building liberated futures, that is not visionary fiction. It is not a form of self-help. It is not a piece of self-exploration. It's not just an exercise in imagination. The goal of this is to change the world, and that is not an optional step. So, for me, if you want to call something visionary fiction, it

needs to do the work. And if it doesn't do the work, I'm not saying it can't be useful, but it's not visionary fiction. And I have certainly asked people to stop calling things visionary fiction for those reasons.

Sur • How was the reception of the “Octavia’s Brood” anthology and in your view, what impact has it had on the social justice movement in the US?

W.I. • It has been amazing. I don't think adrienne and I or any of the contributors ever expected it to receive such amazing feedback. It's been out for over 7 years now and is still going very strong, which is wonderful. It speaks again to the same reason adrienne's and my workshops at the US Social Forum in 2010 were so popular: because there aren't enough spaces like this, and people want those spaces of imagination. If you are engaged in radical organizing, you are already dreaming of science fiction, because all organizing is science fiction. Every time we imagine a world without prisons, borders, capitalism, oppression, that is science fiction. But our movements are so rooted in this notion of what is “realistic” and as a result, our dreaming gets very squashed. That's what happened to me when I started becoming political.

I thought there wasn't space for this nerdy sci-fi part of me because I needed to be serious and do the work. But our movements need to be working in the present and dreaming 100, 200 years in the future. We need spaces that allow us to do that in a way that's not tied to grant deliverables, strategic plans or promises to foundations. We need to be able to dream unfettered, unhindered liberation dreams. I believe that that is what has drawn people to “Octavia’s Brood” – the way that every story allows them to see how this can be done with different movements, different parts of our movements, different issues that folks are working on.

When adrienne and I created it, we had a very hard time getting a publisher. No publisher wanted it because they said, “What is this? Who is this for?” It was not cool to be a nerd back then. I feel that especially now, especially post “Black Panther”, it's really different. So, it took us a long time, and until very late in the process, to actually work with AK Press and the Institute for Anarchist Studies. They were the ones who eventually put it out (which was wonderful for me, as I had been reading AK Press books since I was a teenager, and they've been such a supportive publisher who is deeply engaged in supporting radical movements).

But we found that the intersection between nerds and radical folks is huge; it's much larger than we originally thought. I also remember on our book launch tour in March 2015, someone came up to us and said, “This is the first science fiction book I've ever read and I read it because it's explicitly related to radical politics.” And then later in the tour, we had someone say, “This is the first political thing I've ever read. I love science fiction and so, I picked this up. But I've never really thought about social movements before.” And we didn't expect that. It has been really beautiful to see it not only being

accepted by the group of folks we knew or we hoped would love it, but also moving into these other spaces and serving to connect all those spaces.

Personally, it has been life changing for me. It has changed the way I think, I organize, I move through the world. It has given me comfort, especially in these last few years that have been very difficult for everyone. It has helped to root me in the just futures I want. It has reminded me that even in the worst of time, those futures are still and always possible. I have been very thankful for having that foundation because I don't know where I would have been through the last few years and everything that has come with that without that strong foundation and the connections that I've made through “Octavia's Brood.”

I do want to be very clear that we were not the first ones to do this. This is something radicals have been doing for a long time. This is something Black folks have been doing for centuries. This is something other folks were doing in other spaces that we didn't even know about, and they didn't know about us. But it has been wonderful because it served as a beacon and drew folks who were already doing that work. And they said, “Oh, we've been doing this too.” We've been able to connect with so many visionaries. It has been wonderful to see how it has allowed us and others to find kin.

Sur • Considering your work and your artistic and educational endeavours, what would you say today to the human rights movement in a post-pandemic context and in view of the reconfigurations of global power?

W.I. • I would just say we're definitely not post-Covid or post-pandemic. That framing is fundamentally false and what it does is invisibilize the most vulnerable folks in our communities who are still very much living through the heart of the pandemic. It also erases their leadership.

Throughout the pandemic, we learned from immunocompromised and disabled folks how to create spaces that are as safe as possible and accessible to as many as possible. Most folks didn't know about using video conferencing for classes, for school or even just to spend time with friends, but disabled folks had been doing that already. We didn't know how to protect one another from transmission – around the world people had to watch basic videos about masks and hand washing to understand this. But immunocompromised folks generously shared the hard-won knowledge they used every day just to survive in this world. Disabled and immunocompromised folks had been doing all of this by themselves in isolation from the larger society because we did not support it before. But if we had, if we had already centred that leadership and vision and experience, I believe we might actually be able to say we were post-pandemic and have it be true. And now around the world and in the US, the mainstream has turned away from all of this and declared us “post pandemic”, again abandoning so many to die and dooming us all to continuing this horrific cycle we are currently in.

But again, for me, a fundamental aspect of visionary fiction is centring on the leadership of those who live at the intersections of oppression, because that is where we see what true liberation for our whole community looks like. Again, if we had been doing the things disability justice and disability liberation folks have been advising us to do for decades, I think the past 3 years would have been drastically different, and millions who are dead would still be here. We have to make sure that we are not buying into and perpetuating the same systems of oppression we're fighting against. I have been very disappointed by radical movements in the US that are no longer thinking about safety when it should now be a fundamental principle of how we care for each other, and a way to challenge this very eugenicist project that is ongoing and that defines how Covid is being dealt with. It really is strongly connected to white supremacy, to ableism. It is really a sort of survival-of-the-fittest social Darwinism at its worst. It is certainly not how anyone in radical movements I know would want to live and yet, we are defaulting to that because that is what the larger society is doing. And that is again a space where we need to be able to imagine those futures we want and pull them into the present. I imagine that folks who believe in human rights would want futures where everyone felt comfortable moving about, had the autonomy to move out in public, to have everything they needed to be present, without fearing for their very lives. If that is the case, we need to build those worlds right now.

Sur • Today, digital tools and the digital environment intensify the dispute over narratives. Fake news, for example, instigates terror through discourses that manipulate people's emotions and fears. What is your analysis of this scenario? What tools do we have to deal with this dispute and build narratives that generate inspiration without using fear?

W.I. • The extreme reactionary cases of fake news, the election deniers, Covid deniers – all those that are fundamentally in conflict with science obviously have to be challenged and dealt with. I also think that the narrative around fake news sets up a dichotomy [in which everything outside mainstream media] is the only fake news, legitimizing mainstream media. That is a deep concern because radical movements, folks trying to change the world for the better have always been maligned in the mainstream media, which distorts the realities of what we're doing.

I've just finished teaching a class this term on the history of the Black Panther Party, which in the US is one of the most maligned organizations. The things that students come in thinking they know about the Black Panther Party – they say, "Oh, well, they were anti-white. They only were for Black people. They were all about guns." None of those things are true at all. They actually formed the most effective multiracial coalition in the history of the United States. They formed close partnerships and nurtured radical white organizations. They fought for the liberation of everyone who was oppressed around the world. They spent most of their time feeding children and running health care clinics. But that is not what the media portrays. It's not what history books teach children. So, to me, all of that is also fake news.

I do think it is important to separate out categories. It is important to challenge that complete denial of scientific fact and of what is literally written right in front of you, in black and white, while saying that there are “alternative facts”.

As radical folks, as folks who will continually be maligned in the mainstream for trying to create a better world, it’s important to make sure that we do not allow a dichotomy to be set up which makes it look as if only official news sources are credible.

We have to have spaces where we write our own stories. We have to be able to start from scratch to create our own frameworks and narratives. We can try to strategically use the mainstream, but we have to know that our message will never be delivered the way we want. So we have to create our own independent spaces of information and knowledge. Again, this is what the Black Panther Party did – they were incredibly adept at using the mainstream media as a recruiting tool, but they never relied on the mainstream media to actually convey their politics or message accurately. They in fact started their own newspaper, which had the highest circulation of any Black newspaper in the US, was printed in multiple languages and carried their actual political ideologies and work across the country and around the world.

We need to also create countless spaces and avenues, and art is a fundamental way of reaching people. Art moves and connects people. Very soon after “Black Panther” came out, I was in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, and to see Black folks in Africa doing the Wakanda symbol was very powerful because it resonated with Black folks across the diaspora. It connected us. And again, it’s put out by Disney, one of the most evil corporations in the history of the world, maybe since the East India Trading Company. Although what was created within that space is not perfect, it was so important for Black people in the US. Black people are going to see it together – not just families, but churches and youth groups, people who didn’t consider themselves political.

This notion of an Africa that had never been colonized, this notion of Blackness not constrained by white supremacy being allowed to develop as it could have was something that Black people wanted to see together, as a collective act, to hold and witness that. It was beautiful to see that that was something shared among Black folks in different spaces. And again, there are many critiques to be made. I’m not trying to say it is a perfect piece at all, but it was a moment of seeing, even within mainstream media, that those folks had worked hard to create something that had enough authenticity and resonated. It’s important to take what is of use from those spaces, but we also need to create our own spaces where we don’t have to contend with a multinational corporation.

Sur • Would you say that visionary fiction can be an instrument for assisting communities in developing better ways of understanding mass communication and history itself?

W.I. • One of the principles of visionary fiction is that it's rooted in decolonized, nonlinear dreaming, which to me is about recognizing the centrality of experiences of people of colour – and especially for me, Black folks – and the ways that we need an authentic, real past to be able to build the futures we want. The Eurocentric Western white narrative about science fiction and progress is that we're always leaving the past behind, always getting better; the past is worse and we have nothing to learn from it. We're just going to keep going in this straight line. That's a white thing. No culture of colour before colonization thought that way, especially African cultures, who thought about time differently. There are many different ways, but it was never this straight, linear progression that we can't go back to, that doesn't allow a return, a revisiting, a reengagement.

It's really important to recognize that we are in communion with those who have come before and we need to be able to reach back and connect with that to be able to move forward. We're not just studying them; we have to actively dream with them. We are dreaming the same freedom dreams that our ancestors dreamed. It is an active conversation with them.

I think that visionary fiction absolutely has a place to allow us to reimagine what has been taken. Scholar Saidiya Hartman's notion of having to fill in those pieces of history that have been erased for us, for Black people, because of the purposeful disruption of our connection to our histories. Especially as Black folks, we can't go back in the traditional sense of being able to read written accounts, of being able to trace our lineage through our family trees. Those narratives weren't written because they purposely and brutally tried to keep Black people from writing under slavery. We don't know what day-to-day life for people was in the same way that we know what day-to-day life of white colonizers was like because colonizers wrote that stuff down. And we now have to learn that stuff and act as if that's the true history.

I teach about Africa, Black history and slavery in the US. Obviously, students read a lot of historical texts, but I also have them read Octavia Butler's "Kindred", which is the story of a Black woman from 1976 being pulled back in time into the slave period in the Antebellum South. It shows what a more modern Black woman's view of slavery is like, and it's horrific. I have them read that because I don't think reading a historical text saying this many millions of people died or were enslaved, or this many laws passed, or this many uprisings – I don't think that allows us as humans to fully comprehend what it was like to embody that. That is a space where visionary fiction is needed to allow us to embody not just the oppression, but the resistance that brought us to this moment. Visionary fiction pieces like "Kindred" allow us to do that in a way that studying every historical text never will.

Obviously, we have to know the sort of factual parts. And also, knowing things emotionally is truly knowing things. I definitely believe that this sort of artistic space is a pedagogy. It's a way of learning and knowing.

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For those things that have been lost to us in the past and those things that right now, we can't reach into, like the future, I believe that visionary fiction is a pedagogical way of knowing and then shaping the past. If we learn about the past not in the way that it's taught, but in a different way, we are reshaping it, which means that we can then see the present differently. We have then, in essence, changed the present and changed the future as well.



Walidah Imarisha.
Source: Personal archive photo.

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*Interview conducted in December 2022 by Gabrielle Martins da Silva,
Renato Barreto and Bruno Oliveira.
Original in English.*

NOTES

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- 1 • Walidah Imarisha, "Introduction," in adrienne maree brown e Walidah Imarisha (eds.), *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories From Social Justice Movements* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2015): 3.
- 2 • Walidah Imarisha, "Rewriting The Future: Using Science Fiction To Re-Envision Justice." Bitch Media, February 11, 2015, accessed December 31, 2022, <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/rewriting-the-future-prison-abolition-science-fiction>.



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