

NOTES FOR  
BEGINNING  
AS PRAXIS

#### REVOLUTIONARY LETTER #4

Left to themselves people  
grow their hair.  
Left to themselves they  
take off their shoes.  
Left to themselves they make love  
sleep easily  
share blankets, dope & children  
they are not lazy or afraid  
they plant seeds, they smile, they  
speak to one another. The word  
coming into its own : touch of love  
on the brain, the ear.

We return with the sea, the tides  
we return as often as leaves, as numerous  
as grass, gentle, insistent, we remember  
the way,  
our babes toddle barefoot thru the cities of the universe.

1. Diane di Prima, 'Revolutionary Letter #4' in *Revolutionary Letters* (1971)

*Imagination!* who can sing thy force?  
Or who describe the swiftness of thy course?  
Soaring through air to find the bright abode,  
Th' empyreal palace of the thund'ring God,  
We on thy pinions can surpass the wind,  
And leave the rolling universe behind:  
From star to star the mental optics rove,  
Measure the skies, and range the realms above.  
There in one view we grasp the mighty whole,  
Or with new worlds amaze th' unbounded soul.

2. Phillis Wheatley, 'On Imagination' (1773)



3. Susan Hiller, *Dream Mapping* (1974)

Since last year, I have been having apocalyptic dreams. Not desert wastelands but experiments in community and care. Everything living, free and abundant. The end of the world as we know it — the end of domination, of scarcity. Which is maybe what science fiction writer Octavia E. Butler, in *Parable of the Talents*, means when she writes, ‘In order to rise from its own ashes, a Phoenix must first burn.’ Or, as geographer and prison abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore says, ‘Abolition requires that we change one thing: everything.’ And change requires imagination, so aren’t dreams a prerequisite to our liberation?

In his essay ‘Walking Backwards into the Future’, Raymond Williams writes, ‘Capitalism, in all its restless stages, has always attached itself to the idea of progress, of course in its own versions.’

The idea of progress is murky. By capitalist metrics, we have progressed very far. On average, we live longer, we are better educated. By other standards — by any that values life — we are walking backwards off a cliff. But capitalist ideas of progress limit our imaginations, blinkering us to alternative modes of living. In a @donoteato1 video on radical urbanism and the possibilities of

a green new deal, Adrienne Buller explains that ‘[o]ur economic model, defined by the rules of neoliberalism and dominated by the logics and imperatives of finance and large corporations, is inherently extractive, unstable, unequal and destructive.’ This model, and the social relations it engenders, is inherently harmful. Therefore, to make progress under these conditions means only to further refine the processes of extraction, instability, inequality and destruction.

Prison abolitionist Mariame Kaba, in *We Do This ‘Til We Free Us*, invites us to replace the reformist question of ‘What do we have now, and how can we make it better?’ with the more generative, open-ended question: ‘What can we imagine for ourselves and for the world?’ We have been reforming modern society since its inception, clearly what we need is not reform but revolution. Meaning, radical change at every level. Meaning resistance. Meaning wild dreaming. Meaning there are no impossibilities, only challenges. Otherwise we will remain caught in these cycles of crisis — the inevitabilities of imperialism.



4. Amiri Baraka and Diane di Prima at Cedar Tavern, ph. Fred W. McDarrah (1968)

Mexico,<sup>2</sup> so we must design The Conquest of White Eye, and show the missionaries and wiggly Liberals dying under blasts of concrete. For sound effects, wild screams of joy, from all the peoples of the world.

The Revolutionary Theatre must take dreams and give them a reality. It must isolate the ritual and historical cycles of reality. But it must be food for all these who need food, and daring propaganda for the beauty of the Human Mind. It is a political theatre, a weapon to help in the slaughter of these dimwitted fat-bellied white guys who somehow believe that the rest of the world is here for them to slobber on.

This should be a theatre of World Spirit. Where the spirit can be shown to be the most competent force in the world. Force. Spirit. Feeling. The language will be anybody's, but tightened by the poet's backbone. And even the language must show what the facts are in this consciousness epic, what's happening. We will talk about the world, and the preciseness with which we are able to summon the world, will be our art. Art is method. And art, "like any ashtay or senator" remains in the world. Wittgenstein said ethics and aesthetics are one. I believe this. So the Broadway theatre is a theatre of reaction whose ethics like its aesthetics reflects the spiritual values of this unholy society, which sends young crackers all over the world blowing off colored people's heads. (In some of these flippy southern towns they even shoot up the immigrants' Favorite Son, be it Michael Schwerner<sup>3</sup> or J. F. Kennedy.)

The Revolutionary Theatre is shaped by the world, and moves to reshape the world, using as its force the natural force and perpetual vibrations of the mind in the world. We are history and desire, what we are, and what any experience can make us.

5. Amiri Baraka, 'The Revolutionary Theatre' in *Liberator* (1965)



6. Portrait of Phillis Wheatley, attrib. Scipio Moorhead (1773)



7. Octavia Butler, ph. Alice Arnold



8. Ana Mendieta, from *Siluetas Works in Iowa* (1976-78)

In a 1978 speech about ecology and utopia, the anarchist writer Murray Bookchin warned against futurism: ‘Futurism is the present as it exists today, projected, one hundred years from now.’ This is often reflected in mainstream science-fiction, projections of the present, limited by an inability/unwillingness to dream the world unmade. Which is why Bookchin could predict Elon Musk: ‘They want multinational corporations to become multi-cosmic corporations [...] they want to colonise the Moon, they can’t wait to go to Jupiter, much less Mars.’

Ecofeminists Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva describe this as the ‘development paradigm’, and are similarly wary of the possibilities it presents for change and its capacity to support life: ‘Loss of diversity is the price paid in the patriarchal model of progress which pushes inexorably towards monocultures, uniformity and homogeneity.’

Capitalism’s “progress” projects the social conditions that structure our present in all directions, mapping capitalist relations onto the historical and the imagined future. In an article about cave paintings, Sam Kriss describes this perfectly: ‘The values of contemporary capitalism are drawn out

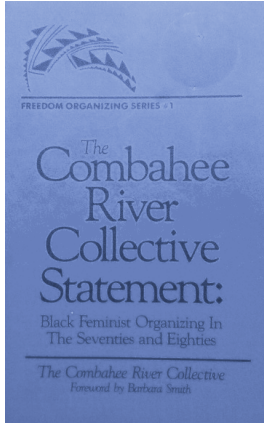


9. Activists with the Chipko movement in India, protecting local forests from deforestation (c. 1973)

into a suffocating eternity: it was always like this, and it always will be'. But, despite its bureaucratic complexity, this world-system is relatively new. The science fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin, in an essay published alongside a reprinted edition of Thomas More's *Utopia*, writes: 'The exercise of imagination is dangerous to those who profit from the way things are because it has the power to show that the way things are is not permanent, not universal, not necessary.'

Even a construction of linear time as the forward march of progress isn't universal. Some languages do not have a distinct past tense. In the English language, there is no (morphological) future tense—only the present and the past. Yet we talk about the future as though it is situated in front of us, as if we were facing a blank room. In the Aymara language, the past is not behind, but ahead. Knowable. It is the future that is at our backs, out of view. In this construction, the future is necessarily the product of dreams, imaginary but not immaterial. Those of us who speak in terms of "what's ahead," maybe we face the future too much and neglect what we can learn from/with the past.





10. The Combahee River Collective Statement (1977)



11. Dried peas harvested by the Sapelo Island Red Pea Project (c. 2013)

### Phase III: DREAMING

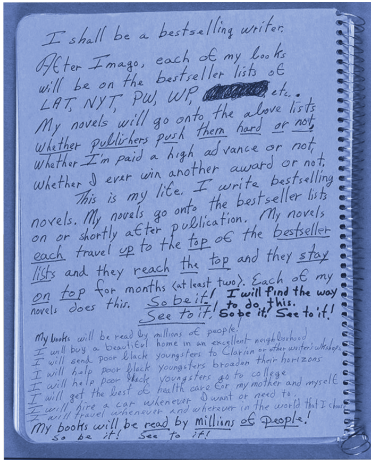
This phase is the most crucial for decolonization. Here is where the full panorama of possibilities are expressed, considered through debate, consultation, and building dreams on further dreams which eventually becomes the flooring for the creation of a new social order.

It is during this phase where people colonized are able to explore their own cultures, their own aspirations for their future, considering their own structures of government and social order which encompass and expresses their hopes.

So crucial is this phase that it must be allowed to run its full course. If the dreaming is cut short by any action plan or program designed to create a remedy meeting the perception of the issue at a premature stage, the result can prove disastrous.

I liken this phase to the formation of a fetus in a mother's womb. That fetus must be allowed its time to develop and grow to its full potential. To attempt to rush the process, bringing baby out earlier than its natural time, could prove dangerous if not disastrous.

An examination of the Pacific as well as the world's decolonization pattern may be helpful. There are many instances in which people who underwent "decolonization" merely underwent a change in position of the colonizer. See, for example, the constitutions of the newly emerged Pacific island nations as well as African nations. Do they reflect more closely the social and legal culture of the immediate preceding colonizer or of the indigenous culture? Are the people previously colonized? Or do they

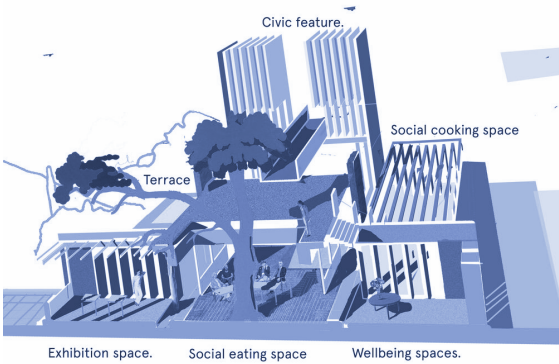


13. Octavia Butler's journal (1988)

The mode you think in affects the thoughts you arrive at. Modes of dreaming: linguistic, cultural, formal. In Welsh and other languages that have historically consolidated knowledge through mythology and oral traditions, storytelling makes space for unrealities. Experiences of marginality, of cultural subjugation, make dream-spaces necessary. In a fictional tourism guide for an independent Hawaii in the year 2035, Poka Laenui, an advocate for Native Hawaiian rights, imagines the 'dreaming phase of decolonisation' as a key stage in the island's independence process. To dream is to begin to question the world we live in, to begin to embody worlds in which we would be free.

The world must be remade. Not destroyed, not rolled back to feudalism, not replaced with authoritarianism, but every system, every structure transformed to support all life. Williams admits: 'The practical transformations that we need are immense, and their procedures will be found only in detailed, informed and fully contemporary analysis. Yet whether we do this analysis, and go on to act on it, still depends on our basic ideas, and on the perspectives that follow from them.'

When we talk about "analysis" and "ideas,"



#### 14. A vision for a National Food Service

towards liberation, we must be talking about dreams at scale. What we allow ourselves to dream, even as individuals, betrays the limits of our collective imagination, of possibility itself. The further we dream, the wider the possibilities we open to ourselves. In *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, historian Robin D. G. Kelley writes: ‘The hard work of changing our values and reorganizing social life requires political engagement, community involvement, education, debate and discussion, and dreaming.’

Even now, at what feels like the end of the world, people are experimenting with dreams. What is a community fridge, or a proposal for a National Food Service, if not a dream of a world without hunger? What is a group of mothers claiming homes for their community, if not a dream of every person housed? What is decriminalisation, of sex work, of drugs, if not a dream of a world without police or prisons, a dream of abolition? What are calls for universal basic income if not dreams of a world where we all have enough?

Ahead of us now, we have equally an ambitious historical task. The consequences of racial capitalism are manifest in the destruction of our planet-

-ary ecosystem. Bookchin said that we will not end the climate crisis without ending all other crises: ‘The attitude that we’ve had towards nature has always depended on the attitude we’ve had towards each other.’

The uprisings of summer 2020, and the sudden entry of prison abolition into popular political discourse, convinced me that all students of liberation, anyone who wants the world to be better, must be a dreamer. It is our duty to dream widely and wildly. We must imagine and demand things that, at first, sound impossible. Gilmore describes abolition as ‘a theory of change.’ A theory of presence, not absence, not destruction but creation.

Dreams are transformative. It is a disservice to ourselves to describe the revolutionary potential of the imagination as exclusively internal. I have to believe that our most innate quality is not domination, but creation — and I have to believe that everything is within our power. After all, these systems of oppression, everything that exists today is the product of human action. Meaning, everything that will exist tomorrow must also be the product of our actions.








The dream must be collective. Kaba says: ‘Everything that is worthwhile is done with other people.’ Williams’ idea of a ‘sharing socialism’ asks us the question: ‘Was life an arena in which individuals should strive to improve their own conditions, or was it a network of human relationships in which people found everything of value in and through each other?’ If we find ourselves in an arena, must we stay there? To change everything, we have to dream of everything first. Start with the world we want, and walk backwards. Another world is necessary, so we have to pursue it, no matter how impossible, how impractical it seems. After all, everything was once a dream.

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## Which Way Is Tomorrow?

Spatial metaphors for past and future vary around the world.

| LANGUAGE                                      | SPATIAL METAPHOR                       |   | BASIS OF METAPHOR  |
|---|--|---|--|
| English<br>(and many others)                  | Past = behind,<br>future = in front    |  | Walking forward  |
| English<br>(and many others)                  | Past = leftward,<br>future = rightward |  | Writing, calendars,<br>and timelines                       |
| Hebrew  | Past = rightward,<br>future = leftward |  | Writing direction  |
| Mandarin                                      | Past = above,<br>future = below        |  | Writing direction  |
| Aymara (South America),<br>Vietnamese         | Past = in front,<br>future = behind    |  | Past is known and<br>seen; future is<br>unknown and unseen |
| Yupno (Papua New Guinea),<br>Tzeltal (Mexico) | Past = downhill,<br>future = uphill    |  | Unknown  |
| Pormpuraaw<br>(Australia)                     | Past = east,<br>future = west          |  | Path of the sun  |

15. Scientific American, *How We Make Sense of Time*

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EVERYTHING  
WAS ONCE  
A DREAM