Creative Introduction

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"But in their own way, the new generation—to whom so much had been given, from whom so much was being stolen, for whom so little would be promised—would not settle for the things previous generations had been willing to settle for. Concede them a demand and they would demand more. Give them an apocalypse, and they would dance" (Chang 19).

Jeff Chang's words above were written about the youth who created hip hop in 1970s South Bronx. And yet it feels timeless and absolutely relevant today. This is partially because the same structural inequalities, staggering disparities, and systemic oppressions that shaped the lives of late 20th century poor/working class urban Black and Brown kids still sculpt the present. But likewise, this same spirit of creative resistance, righteous rebellion, and innovative audacity pervade the art of those who are metaphorically dancing through this current apocalypse.

The ability to dance through an apocalypse is something communities of color have honed and perfected over the countless generations of destruction they have survived, in this nation and globally. Having lived through so many historic and ongoing assaults, communities of color have made themselves into fire-activated seeds, like the eucalyptus. The eucalyptus understands the world it lives in, understands fire is inevitable, and plans for it. The heat releases the seed, allowing new life to be birthed in an inferno.

As Black feminist science fiction writer and luminary Octavia E. Butler wrote, "In order to rise / from its own ashes / A phoenix / First / Must / Burn" (137).

The rise of so many movements for justice and liberation within communities of color is the seed sprouting in the blaze, the phoenix ever rising from previous

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generations' pyres. Amidst the literal fires ravaging our planet, along with so many other climate catastrophes, Indigenous communities continue to be the warrior caretakers for us all. Through the decades and centuries of onslaught against Black communities by law enforcement, again and again resistance movements like Black Lives Matter have exploded forth. And of course all of these movements are not only connected, they breathe deeply as one, exhaling liberation dreams.

Those in these movements hold hope even in the face of the unimaginably brutal. "Let this radicalize you rather than lead you to despair," prison abolitionist Mariame Kaba instructed us. Art is a powerful arena for this alchemic process of transmuting pain and horror into hope. Art allows us to not only sustain ourselves through trauma, but also allows us to imagine a way through it. When we cannot see beyond the abyss beneath our feet, we cling to the edge. But what if the abyss is actually a portal?

As A.J. Hudson writes in the essay "The End of the World, for Whom?": "One way or another Climate Change will end our world. But not all endings are bleak."

The "Curating At the End of the World" exhibit shows that apocalypse has happened before. It is sometimes necessary for the new to be born. Created to respond to the multitude of intersecting "existential threats" to Black people in the diaspora, the first section of the exhibit opened online during the beginnings of the pandemic, when so much felt terrifying and unknown, dystopic and devastating. The three art pieces reprinted here show the breadth of the response to that ongoing crisis, which of course is connected to all other crises. The images capture the horror but also the hope not just of these artists but also Black communities. It helps recenter the historic certainty of Black visionary survival rooted in Black creativity that is our birthright.

As Reynaldo Anderson and Sheree Renee Thomas write in their essay, "This work is remembrance and resurrection, resistance and restored hope in a social, economic, and political landscape of uprisings and upheaval, strange fruit buried in scorched earth."

This is the charge of the artist in all times but especially these times.

If artists of color are truly honest about themselves, their communities, and this world, they have to be disruptors and subversives. In a country rooted in white supremacist hetero-patriarchal capitalism (word to bell hooks), to see people of color as whole complex beings is a subversive act. It demands a disruption in the everyday narrative, a fracture from business-as-usual racism.

Art like "Brown Skin Goddess" by Kaanchi Chopra is such an intervention. Showing anti-patriarchal frameworks as completely embedded in and intertwined with natural elements, Chopra creates "this brown-skinned female body who reclaims public space." The distortion in size, with her being so much larger than the constructed landscapes behind her, is actually a distortion that sets right what is wrong, allowing the viewer to finally see things in proper perspective.

This intertwining of nature and complex humanity also comes through beautifully in Darcie Little Badger's two pieces. The creation of a ritual with a fallen tree to help hold the overpowering grief of losing a loved one is both a poignant individual

act, and an offering of a collective ritual of mourning, of holding, of healing in a time of scarred landscapes and missing loves.

A collective experience, in joy or rage or grief or hope (or all of the above) is central to all of the art in this issue. It can felt be through the collections "Curating At the End of the World" or "Picturing A World Without Prisons," both of which give us a multiplicity of perspectives to explore the topics the larger exhibits focused on. It can be felt through an individual perspective on collective movements, like the photographs of the Climate Justice Youth Summit, capturing the urgency as well as the vibrancy of the present. Likewise, Ananda Gabo's poster for the community lab in Chinatown is not only about advertising for a specific community project. The questions on the poster art create a time-and-space-defying invitation to those who see it, inviting the viewer to join the process of interrogation.

We are often told we have to choose between the individual and the collective, but the reality is that making space for our individual brilliance only strengthens the whole, and moving in tandem with community allows us a vision beyond what we could have imagined on our own.

Because we are working to move beyond what we have been told is possible. And that is terrifying to do alone, stepping into the unknown, into what we have been told our whole lives is impossible. It becomes less terrifying and more possible when others are by our side. We need each other to move. And move we must. Because the world is figuratively and literally burning around us, and communities of color have been on fire for centuries, and we can no longer wait for the slow unraveling that is moderation on issues like climate change, racial justice, gender justice, abolition (which are, really, all the same issue = liberation). Now we must imagine beyond, into the realm of "the impossible" because there is where our collective salvation lies.

As science fiction writer Ursula K. LeGuin said in her 2014 National Book Foundation award acceptance speech, "We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable – but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art."

Projects like the photo exhibit "Picturing A World Without Prisons" is the kind of liberated world-building project that truly allows folks to question an institution we have all been told for decades our society cannot exist without, the carceral system. The images reproduced here from the exhibit offer us examples of what abolition could look like on larger scales, as well as ways that abolition practices are already being grown and cultivated. This exhibit highlights that art not only helps you to intellectually engage with potential liberated futures, but lets you feel them to your core, lets you immerse yourself in them.

Art like this is a necessity for us to engage with, to use to push our own understanding further. We have all been fed the same stories about what is and is not possible, and if we are to transcend those, we cannot become complacent. We must always try to imagine more and bigger. Alexis Pauline Gumbs (who created the stunning collage tribute to Octavia E. Butler's work that graces our cover), said on the panel transcribed here "Writing New Worlds Plenary," "This idea that

we could really vision to the end of what we could imagine, and what we had been working so hard to achieve… allows me to see the limits of my own imagination… It allows me to be creative there. Which then means I'm not being reactive to the present situation, I'm being expansive and going as far as I possibly can with my imagination…"

And of course, the goal of all of this creativity and imagination and subversion is to create real world changes. This work of imagining just and sustainable worlds is the most serious of business. It is not an intellectual exercise, it is a biological imperative if we are to survive. And key to that is rejecting the artificial limits placed on our ability to change social systems. Those limits are part of how resistance is controlled.

Like the main character from Dani McClain's short story "Homing Instinct," we have been and continue to be offered two unacceptable options. Let this art inspire you to reject the societal controls placed on you. Join the countless around the globe who are creating third, fourth, fifth, infinite other options that carry the chance of saving both our world and every single life that calls it home.

So, Octavia E. Butler wrote in her personal journals, "So be it! See to it!" (The Huntington).

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