

# Designing Equitable Worlds: Six Orientations to Evoke the Future

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*But now is the time to think like poets, to envision and make visible a new society, a peaceful, cooperative, loving world without poverty and oppression.*<sup>1</sup>

## Experiential Social Futures

The lunch counter sit-ins in the 1960s U.S. civil rights movement prefigured (or pre-created) the social integration that activists were fighting toward. When Black students protested by sitting quietly and peacefully in restaurants in segregated Southern cities spaces reserved only for white patrons, the physicality of these actions gave the public a preview of a racially integrated future.<sup>2</sup> Such embodied prefiguring can inspire a design practice that makes future hopes tangible so that others can engage with them. The emerging practice of experiential futures demonstrates that designers have an arsenal of ways to make conceptual ideas into material, informative, and interactive experiences useful for exploring the future.<sup>3</sup> Connecting these materializations of future visions with social innovation projects can demonstrate the long-term goals of social justice movements.

Visions of better, more just futures can offer a concrete picture that motivates people toward change, especially in complex social efforts, such as racial justice. Materializing future visions can be instrumental for persuasion. Clearer visions could convince people who hold power and those who may be indifferent to the change needed to invest in a new future.

Giving form to socially compelling future visions is a specific way for designers to contribute to social justice movements. Clarifying and illustrating the missions of justice movements is a way that design activism can put creative energy toward “support of collective action through design.”<sup>4</sup> Making vivid expressions that evoke successful justice efforts is an additional orientation to speculative and adversarial design.<sup>5</sup> Vividness provokes conversation and imagination by conjuring desirable outcomes and asking, “How can we get here together?” By bringing the creative strengths of design to explore, materialize, map, construct, and prototype visions of the future, designers can strengthen the concepts and messages of partners in justice spaces.

- 1 Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 196.
- 2 Susan Leigh Foster, “Choreographies of Protest,” *Theatre Journal* 55, no. 3 (2003): 395–412, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2003.0111>.
- 3 Stuart Candy, “The Futures of Everyday Life: Politics and the Design of Experiential Scenarios,” PhD diss., University of Hawai’i at Manoa, 2010; Stuart Candy and Jake Dunagan, “Designing an Experiential Scenario: The People Who Vanished,” *Futures* 86 (2017): 136–53.
- 4 Sarah Fox, Catherine Lim, Tad Hirsch, and Daniela K. Rosner, “Accounting for Design Activism: On the Positionality and Politics of Designerly Intervention,” *Design Issues* 36, no. 1 (2020): 9, [https://doi.org/10.1162/desi\\_a\\_00571](https://doi.org/10.1162/desi_a_00571).
- 5 Ivica Mitrović, James Auger, Julian Hanna, and Ingi Helgason, eds., *Beyond Speculative Design: Past – Present – Future* (Split: SpeculativeEdu, 2021); Carl DiSalvo, *Adversarial Design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012); Bruce M. Tharp and Stephanie M. Tharp, *Discursive Design: Critical, Speculative, and Alternative Things* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).

This article aims to understand how design can engage long-term perspectives to support the work of advocating for racial justice in the United States. To explore these opportunities, I draw from scholars at the intersection of design studies, futures studies, and racial justice theories in academia and advocacy settings. These orientations guide my research into how design can bring vividness to describe what racial justice can achieve. While I work primarily with concerns around race, I draw inspiration from a wider social justice perspective that acknowledges and engages the breadth of intersectional identities often marginalized from mainstream power: race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability, nationality, religion, residency status, and more. Like social justice, racial justice is concerned with imbalances in power and creating equitable access to social, economic, political, and cultural resources.<sup>6</sup>

### Making Futures Tangible

To explore the potential of experiential future visions, I begin by exploring how we might rehearse racially just futures.<sup>7</sup> I have “rehearsed” short-term futures through participatory design and full-scale prototypes in my professional work as a design researcher. In 2015 and 2016, my design firm worked alongside technologists, receptionists, nurses, and doctors to build full-scale mock-ups of a range of possibilities for “the hospital lobby of the future.”<sup>8</sup> In ever-increasing levels of fidelity, my team and I ran simulations that felt very much like dress rehearsals. We used stage sets (cardboard walls), props (speculative technology), roles (greeters, service staff, patients, and nurses), and motivations (arriving without a scheduled appointment).

To explore different proposals, we enacted the future lobby scene for a duration of time. We then evaluated how easily the different roles could achieve their goals and what practices and artifacts worked well, and then reflected together on what we would change for the next run-through. This process was an elaborate form of bodystorming—brainstorming with full-body enactment—to generate and evaluate new ways to bring patients into the health care experience. Watching people move through full-scale mock-ups of the lobby experiences helped us catch problems before they were built in permanently. The full-scale prototype experiences became evidence for decision making: acting out the future served as a communication tool for people with the power to feel informed enough to make change and motivated enough to make change happen faster.

Making better possibilities concrete and vivid helps bring them to life for those who imagine them and those who receive them. The proposals can be iterated, refined, and transformed. In *Rehearsing the Future*, Joachim Halse and colleagues write, “The users’ future needs, or latent needs, or unacknowledged

6 Brian Barry, *Why Social Justice Matters* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005); Ann Light and Rosemary Luckin, “Designing for Social Justice: People, Technology, Learning,” Futurelab Discussion Paper (2008); Rae Johnson, *Embodied Social Justice* (Milton Park, UK: Taylor and Francis, 2017).

7 Peter Schwartz used the term “rehearsing the future” in his book on scenario planning. Schwartz describes planning as a series of dress rehearsals for what possible futures might unfold. Peter Schwartz, *The Art of the Long View: Planning for the Future in an Uncertain World* (New York: Doubleday/Currency, 1991).

8 Brady Sih, Hillary Carey, and Michael C. Lin, “Getting from Vision to Reality: How Ethnography and Prototyping Can Solve Late-Stage Design Challenges,” in *Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference Proceedings*, no. 1 (New York: Wiley, 2018).

**Table 1 | Actions Framework: Six Orientations to Envision and Evoke Better Futures**

Theoretical Term	Action	Discipline	Definition
Social dreaming	Expand	Sociology	Propose that a better world is possible
Prolepsis	Call forth	Rhetoric	Speak as if the future is already here
Prophetic imagination	Reframe	Theology	Reclaim the past to make a better future feel possible
Prefigurative agreements	Align	Community organizing	Embody the actions and values of future ways of being
Prefigurative performance	Demonstrate	Political science	Enact an element of a better future
Pre-enact	Iterate	Design futures	Prototype and pilot test to understand and explore potential solutions

Table 1

Note: The term “better” in the table title is used to encompass the plural and diverse ways that different social justice projects approach change-making.

needs are not out there waiting to be revealed. They are *continually in the making* through everyday contestations among neighbors, relatives, colleagues, and the material world they co-inhabit.”<sup>9</sup> Participatory prototypes can be instrumental in understanding how it feels to be in a possible future and convincing those involved to invest in that future.

By making ideas tangible and interactive, publics can try out and try on a possible future to decide if it fits and assess how much they want to work to make it come to life. This deeper engagement and commitment to ideas about the future is what I find intriguing for social change. José Ramos observes that future proposals “can inspire a sense of social responsibility and impetus for social action, at both political and personal levels.”<sup>10</sup> Lyman Tower Sargent advocates for practicing our utopias—whether through writing, living, or social movements—because it is the best way for us to counteract the dominant paradigms of the current worlds we live in.<sup>11</sup> Darren Webb argues that “it is in the visionary annunciation of an alternative society that the critical, imaginative and catalysing power of utopia lies.”<sup>12</sup> Such is the importance of imagining racially equitable futures: guiding people toward action through demonstrations that justice is possible and desirable. Sharing visions of what “better” looks like can draw people into transformative action.

### Making Futures Present

In an article about supporting reparations for the U.S. history of enslavement, Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas uses the future-oriented terms *prolepsis*, to speak as if the future is already present, and *prophetic imagination*, which is to openly acknowledge the wrongs of the past to make a repaired future seem possible.<sup>13</sup> She calls for faith communities “to repair the breach between the unjust present and God’s just future. They must act proleptically; that is, as if that future is now.”<sup>14</sup> These theoretical concepts come from disciplines outside of futures studies but connect to making futures experiential. I began reading across disciplines, asking: How are future

- 9 Joachim Halse, Eva Brandt, Brendon Clark, and Thomas Binder, *Rehearsing the Future* (Copenhagen: Danish Design School Press, 2010), 15; emphasis added.
- 10 José M. Ramos, “Linking Foresight and Action: Toward a Futures Action Research,” in *The Palgrave International Handbook of Action Research*, edited by Lonnie L. Rowell, Catherine D. Bruce, Joseph M. Shosh, and Margaret M. Riel (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 825.
- 11 Lyman Tower Sargent, “In Defense of Utopia,” *Diogenes* 53, no. 1 (2006): 11–17, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192106062432>.
- 12 Darren Webb, “Educational Studies and the Domestication of Utopia,” *British Journal of Educational Studies* 64, no. 4 (2016): 444, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0071005.2016.1143085>.
- 13 Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983); Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 40th anniversary ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018).
- 14 Kelly Brown Douglas, “A Christian Call for Reparations,” *Sojourners*, July 2020, 5, <https://sojo.net/magazine/july-2020/christian-call-case-slavery-reparations-kelly-brown-douglas>.

possibilities made tangible/vivid/experienceable across different fields? I distilled these terms into a set of orientations, or prompts, to translate a future vision into a communication or enactment in the present day.

This investigation resulted in a set of six techniques from various disciplines with different perspectives on world-building (see Table 1). I offer a brief overview of where the terms derive from and then explore each in more detail. The first orientation, social dreaming/expand, offers notions of what the future may contain and challenges what people think of as inevitable.<sup>15</sup> Next, from rhetoric, we have prolepsis/call forth: to speak in ways that evoke an element of the future as if it has already occurred.<sup>16</sup> From theology, there is prophetic imagination/reframe to critique the past and present to make way for the future.<sup>17</sup> From anarchist practice and political science, we can draw on the term *prefigurative*, which has two qualities:<sup>18</sup> employing means that are in line with the world advocates are working toward (prefigurative agreements/align) and demonstrating an alternative world through action (prefigurative performance/demonstrate). Last, from futures practice, we have the term pre-enact/iterate, which, like prefigurative practice, creates an alternative world, but this action is distinguished by its purpose to test ideas and improve them. Rather than demonstrate and perform a vision of the future, pre-enactments are simulated learning experiences designed to gather feedback and inspire ideas.<sup>19</sup>

These perspectives are intertwined and stackable but still valuable in their distinctions. They can be explored or materialized in any order. They are ordered in a way that somewhat reflects the amount of effort involved, from imagining new outcomes to building working prototypes. The first three orientations are language-based activities, and the final three involve action. As a set, they are active ways to conjure and explore the better worlds proposed by social change projects.

### Learning from Workshops

To understand whether these actions could connect to the work of racial justice advocates, I developed workshops to share these orientations in social justice spaces. Through a series of sessions in racial justice gatherings and design conferences, I taught the framework through activities guided by a presentation and worksheets. Participants spent a brief amount of time clarifying what the world might look like when their justice work was “ridiculously successful.” In small groups, they practiced using the framework to brainstorm different ways to evoke that future vision. Through this process I modified the terms to be more actionable and more easily understood.

The workshops confirmed that racial justice participants are excited by the process of imagining and evoking their future

15 Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990).

16 Genette, *Narrative Discourse*; Teresa Bridgeman, “Thinking Ahead: A Cognitive Approach to Prolepsis,” *Narrative* 13, no. 2 (2005): 125–59, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2005.0007>.

17 Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*.

18 Darcy K. Leach, “Prefigurative Politics,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*, edited by David A. Snow, Donatella della Porta, Doug McAdam, and Bert Klandermans (West Sussex, UK: Wiley, 2022).

19 Maja Kuzmanovic and Nik Gaffney, “Prehearsing the Future,” *The Libarynth*, [https://www.libarynth.com/future\\_fabulators/prehearsing\\_the\\_future](https://www.libarynth.com/future_fabulators/prehearsing_the_future) (accessed January 24, 2023).

visions. The framework scaffolds their process of bringing that vision to life. For example, as they learned the concepts, one participant described how their actions are in alignment when they make space for multiple gender identities in their workplaces. Another connected prolepsis to how they speak to students or collaborators in ways that evoke their power and agency, as in calling students “kings” and “queens” to help them embody postures of pride and strength. Others found it powerful to reframe past resistance at their institution to remember that people have always been fighting to demand more equitable policies. These examples demonstrate that participants could understand the orientations, and it may indicate that it is helpful to notice and celebrate what is already existing before creating new forms.

### Six Orientations to Evoke the Future

Activists, artists, ethicists, political scientists, theologians, rhetoricians, and many others engage in bringing the future into the present, in ways that evoke a visceral and emotive glimpse of what that future might feel like. The actions in this framework build on the world-building work of peace activists in futures studies who engage groups of people in change efforts by creating shared visions of a better future.<sup>20</sup>

#### *Social Dreaming (Expanding Belief)*

This first orientation is to propose more liberatory and sustainable ways of being. Such proposals intend to challenge dominant paradigms and practices that people might take for granted as inevitable and unchangeable. Ashis Nandy observes that exploring future possibilities is “an attempt to widen human choices, by reconceptualizing political, social and cultural ends . . . by linking up the fates of different polities and societies through envisioning their common fears and hopes.”<sup>21</sup> Although utopia is often treated as a static description or a final state, *social dreaming* is used to describe an active, often collective practice.<sup>22</sup>

Actively expanding ideas of what is possible in the world is a deliberate move to counteract narrowing, which is a tool of oppression. In *Art of Activism*, Stephen Duncombe and Steve Lambert describe how powerfully the Conservative government in the United Kingdom under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher used a narrowing of possibilities to prevent people from proposing alternative solutions.<sup>23</sup> When creative people partner with experienced advocates with visions for change, we can help the larger public see that other systems and ways of being are possible.

Inviting people to expansively dream of long-term goals is helpful; the long term helps us see beyond what may feel impossible at the current moment. Current challenges may obscure ideas about what someone truly wants. When people collectively imagine

- 20 Fred Polak, *The Image of the Future* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1973); Elise Boulding, “Image and Action in Peace Building,” *Journal of Social Issues* 44, no. 2 (1988): 17–37; Francis Hutchinson, *Educating beyond Violent Futures* (London: Routledge, 2005); Sohail Inayatullah, “Six Pillars: Futures Thinking for Transforming,” *Foresight* 10, no. 1 (2008): 4–21, <https://doi.org/10.1108/14636680810855991>.
- 21 Ashis Nandy, “Bearing Witness to the Future,” *Futures* 28, nos. 6–7 (1996): 637, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0016-3287\(96\)84465-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0016-3287(96)84465-X)
- 22 Sargent, “In Defense of Utopia”; Liz Sanders and Pieter Stappers, “From Designing to Co-Designing to Collective Dreaming: Three Slices in Time,” *Interactions* 21, no. 16 (2014): 24–33, <https://doi.org/10.1145/2670616>; Pedro Gil Farias, Roy Bendor, and Bregje F. van Eekelen, “Social Dreaming Together: A Critical Exploration of Participatory Speculative Design,” in *Proceedings of the Participatory Design Conference*, no. 2 (2022): 147–54, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3537797.3537826>.
- 23 “To any complaint about the inequity of power or wealth, or the brutality of cuts to public services, she would simply reply: ‘There is no alternative.’ . . . What can one possibly do if one accepts that the world that we live in is the only possible world there is, and that our station in life is not the result of political decisions, but the natural, inevitable outcome of history?” Stephen Duncombe and Steve Lambert, *The Art of Activism: Your All-Purpose Guide to Making the Impossible Possible* (New York: OR Books, 2021).

long-horizon futures, they can clarify ideas about what they want to achieve. These visions can serve as the lodestar or stretch goal as they work to make it reality.

Moreover, the practice of imagining a world that is ridiculously hopeful may be a valuable activity on its own. “Ridiculously hopeful future” is the phrase I have been using in workshops to give permission to dream boldly. “It is an immense gift to make concrete our imaginings, so they are not just vague ether but tangible things we can see and embody and fight for,” wrote Walidah Imarisha about a call for authors to imagine liberatory futures.<sup>24</sup> This shows up in my experience in workshops with racial justice advocates, where I have found that people respond to the practice of describing a future that is less fraught with resistance and barriers with comments such as “No one has ever asked me this before,” and “I would feel free.” Practicing the skills of dreaming alternatives to oppressive, intractable systems is a rare space to think about what movements are ultimately working toward.

Prompts for social dreaming:

- What is in the world today that we want to see more of? Imagine that is the dominant characteristic.
- What is in the world today that we want to see less of? Imagine that it is no longer a problem. What becomes possible?
- What would our organization look like when we have truly succeeded? What could the world look like when our advocacy work is no longer needed?

### *Prolepsis (Calling Forth)*

The next orientation, prolepsis, is a rhetorical term describing language that brings an element of the future into being in the present. By speaking it aloud, a concept becomes more possible. Gérard Genette established prolepsis as “the narrative maneuver that consists of narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place in the future.”<sup>25</sup> Marc Redfield defines prolepsis as “in the aiming or speaking or imagining, the addressee comes into being *as* a future.”<sup>26</sup> Redfield analyzes a historic speech that addresses “the German people” before the country had formed. In calling them “Germans,” the orator helps bring the audience into an experience of that possible future. Michael Cole suggests uses of prolepsis in how adults address children with an orientation to their future beings.<sup>27</sup> As a teacher might address young students by saying, “Scholars, let’s open our books.” The label *scholar* evokes the people the teacher hopes the students will grow up to be and helps the children imagine themselves in such a future.<sup>28</sup>

Proleptic speech can evoke visions of the future more viscerally than a straightforward description of an objective. Imarisha asserts, “Even the phrase ‘Black Lives Matter’ is visionary

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- 24 Walidah Imarisha, “To Build a Future without Police and Prisons, We Have to Imagine It First,” *Medium*, October 22, 2020, <https://onezero.medium.com/black-lives-matter-is-science-fiction-how-envisioning-a-better-future-makes-it-possible-5e14d35154e3>.
- 25 Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 40.
- 26 Marc Redfield, “Imagi-Nation: The Imagined Community and the Aesthetics of Mourning,” *Diacritics* 29, no. 4 (1999): 77.
- 27 Michael Cole, *Cultural Psychology: A Once and Future Discipline* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).
- 28 Margaret Olivia Little, “Abortion and the Margins of Personhood,” *Rutgers Law Journal* 39 (2008): 331–48; Ignacio Brescó de Luna, “The End into the Beginning: Prolepsis and the Reconstruction of the Collective Past,” *Culture and Psychology* 23, no. 2 (2017): 280–94, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X17695761>; Deryn Verity, “Coming Around: Tutors, Orientation, and Prolepsis,” *Journal of Academic Writing* 8, no. 2 (2018): 114–23, <https://doi.org/10.18552/joaw.v8i2.466>.

fiction.”<sup>29</sup> In a present-day society in which Black lives are treated as expendable, “Black lives matter” is proleptic. To design with a proleptic orientation, we develop language to evoke “the representation of a future act or state as if that act were already accomplished or already in existence.”<sup>30</sup> In a world of restorative care, we could refer to audiences as “stewards of community safety” or to engage people in beneficial acts, perhaps, “Safety Keepers, how will we care for our communities today?” Enlisting the help of skilled writers and speakers for these activities will help find compelling ways to bring people into a possible future.

Prompts for prolepsis:

- What are some possible roles, titles, attributes, and qualities of communities that will exist when we manifest our utopian visions?
- What incredible transformations, upheavals, rituals, or accomplishments might our future selves look back on with pride?
- How might it feel to live in a world where your revolution has been successful? What new descriptions does that future evoke?

#### *Prophetic Imagination (Reframing Past and Present)*

From theology and the study of sermonizing, prophetic imagination describes moving people toward a better future by reframing the past and present. We can see the maneuver in Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s powerful “I Have a Dream” speech, delivered at the 1963 March on Washington. More than 200,000 people gathered in the U.S. capital to hear the civil rights leader’s speech and demand action from the government. Walter Brueggemann identifies how King’s speech artfully “begins with grief,” acknowledging “a social situation of pain, loss, fear, resentment, and antagonism.”<sup>31</sup> King intones, “I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.”<sup>32</sup> He acknowledges the present pain and the past injustice, which makes his belief in a better future more powerful.

Prophetic imagination prescribes a reckoning with the pain of today and an insistence that there is room for hope. A hope that Brueggemann finds requires “acts of imagination” that “offer and propose ‘alternative worlds’ that exist because of and in the act of utterance.”<sup>33</sup> King identifies his hope among injustice: “I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.”<sup>34</sup> As Krista Tippett points out, this speech prophetically “accomplishes the harder, more necessary work of reframing the big picture of what is at stake, so that we can take in the reality of our moment in a new way, with a new

29 Imarisha, “To Build a Future without Police and Prisons.”

30 David J. Staley, “Time and the Ontology of the Future,” *World Futures Review* 9, no. 1 (2017): 9, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1946756717690173>

31 Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 10.

32 Martin Luther King Jr., “I Have a Dream,” *Negro History Bulletin* 31, no. 5 (May 1968): 4.

33 Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 19.

34 King, “I Have a Dream,” 4.

sense of what might be possible.”<sup>35</sup> Prophetic imagination mirrors truth and reconciliation processes: a confession to make space for a new justice.

Nikole Hannah-Jones has recently performed the work of prophetically imagining racial justice in the 1619 Project.<sup>36</sup> Hannah-Jones brought together journalists and historians to reexamine the history of enslavement since the first slave ships arrived in North America 400 years ago. Hannah-Jones is confronting past inaccurate representations of enslaved people as simply victims and therefore indifferent to political structures. Instead, she shows that formerly enslaved people and their descendants have continuously fought for the rights of all Americans, leading the charge for the United States to be the democratic country it has always promised to be. In that way, she creates a path to her vision of a more just society, one that is prophetically informed by the strength and wisdom of African Americans.

Reckoning with the past and present is an investment of time and effort. It is serious work to mine history for new perspectives on how past practices shape present assumptions and structures. Sohail Inayatullah, who often works with government organizations to help multiple stakeholders find common ground and forge future paths, offers tools for this type of mining of the past. One activity he created, the Causal Layered Analysis (CLA), can be helpful. The CLA identifies and maps “deep worldview commitments,” the ideologies, mindsets, and cultural practices that hold our resistance to change in place.<sup>37</sup>

Prompts for prophetic imagining:

- What truths about the past unlock ways to reframe the work we are doing today and the world we are creating for the future?
- What new perspectives on our history can pave the way for a deeper understanding of equity? What can we celebrate in our past that foreshadows the future we want to see?
- How can we engage more deeply with our history that has led to the present-day situation?

*Prefigurative Agreements (Aligning Behaviors)*

This framework now moves from language to embodiment. *Prefigurative politics* is a term developed to describe the anarchist practices of building alternate worlds in the present day. There are two ways to distinguish how the literature defines prefiguring, and as a designer, I interpret that to be two distinct experiences to create. This section focuses on alignment of values and practices, and the other—performing a future world—will be addressed in the next section.

35 Krista Tippett, “The Prophetic Imagination of Walter Brueggemann,” *Huffington Post*, December 22, 2011, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/walter-brueggemann-prophetic-imagination\\_b\\_1165745](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/walter-brueggemann-prophetic-imagination_b_1165745).

36 Nikole Hannah-Jones, “The 1619 Project,” *New York Times*, August 14, 2019; Nikole Hannah-Jones, *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* (New York: One World, 2021).

37 Sohail Inayatullah, “Causal Layered Analysis: Poststructuralism as Method,” *Futures* 30, no. 8 (1998): 815–29, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0016-3287\(98\)00086-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0016-3287(98)00086-X); Sohail Inayatullah, “Anticipatory Action Learning: Theory and Practice,” *Futures* 38, no. 6 (2006): 656–66, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2005.10.003>; José M. Ramos, “Action Research as Foresight Methodology,” *Journal of Futures Studies* 7, no. 1 (2002): 1–24.



In political science, prefiguring is often described as fighting for change through methods that have “ends and means alignment.”<sup>38</sup> In the civil rights movement, activists remained non-violent as they stayed committed to the equitable world they wanted to see, despite the vicious interpersonal and state violence they faced.<sup>39</sup> At the lunch counter sit-ins, angry and aggressive white patrons and brutal police actions were a stark contrast to the calm normalcy of the Black students, committed to civility by reading quietly and refusing to respond to jeers and projectiles.<sup>40</sup> Peace activists often follow a prefigurative principle—refusing to accept that beneficial ends could justify unjust or violent methods.

Prefiguring prompts advocates to align their daily actions with the values they want to see in the world. Community organizers adrienne maree brown and Alicia Garza advocate for the importance of organizations holding themselves to the same standards they hope to create in the larger world.<sup>41</sup> Brown describes that organizational agreements are “a first place we can practice justice, liberation, and alignment with each other and the Planet.”<sup>42</sup> Aligning the rules and practices groups set for themselves is a practice of emergent strategy.

Prefiguring requires that advocates navigate new ways of being through rehearsal: by trying it out and experiencing how it can feel. Shirin Vossoughi and Angela Booker describe the prefigurative practice as a “bottom-up view of social transformation.”<sup>43</sup> Marjorie Faulstich Orellana describes an alignment process as “learning how to construct and live in the kinds of worlds we hope to see.”<sup>44</sup> All are engaging means–end alignment to inspire action today that represents the world advocates want to see in the future. By adopting a commitment to just practices, groups learn and iterate so they can extend their values.

#### Prompts for align:

- What are the qualities of the world we are working toward? How will we behave differently when our vision is achieved?
- Where are our actions today not in line with the values we want to carry into the future?
- What ground rules could help us act in ways that reflect the world we want to bring about?

#### *Prefigurative Performance (Demonstrating Possibilities)*

Performing an element of a future world is an alternative way to prefigure and demonstrate the new values change-makers want to see. The second meaning of prefigurative is to demonstrate alternative values, which then challenge what people understand to be the only way. Ruth Kinna notes that “prefiguration is linked to creativity, subversion, playfulness and to the development of alternative relationships and ways of living.”<sup>45</sup> These constructions

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- 38 Carl Boggs, “Revolutionary Process, Political Strategy, and the Dilemma of Power,” *Theory and Society* 4, no. 3 (1977): 359–93; Marianne Maeckelbergh, “Doing Is Believing: Prefiguration as Strategic Practice in the Alterglobalization Movement,” *Social Movement Studies* 10, no. 1 (2011): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2011.545223>; Luke Yates, “Rethinking Prefiguration: Alternative, Micropolitics, and Goals in Social Movements,” *Social Movement Studies* 14, no. 1 (2015): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2013.870883>.
- 39 Ella Baker, “Bigger than a Hamburger,” *Southern Patriot*, June 1960; Mittie K. Carey, “The Parallel Rhetorics of Ella Baker,” *Southern Communication Journal* 79, no. 1 (2014): 27–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1041794X.2013.847478>.
- 40 Foster, “Choreographies of Protest.”
- 41 adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017); Alicia Garza, *The Purpose of Power: How We Come Together When We Fall Apart* (New York: One World, 2020).
- 42 Brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 40.
- 43 Shirin Vossoughi and Angela Booker, “Transcultural Prefigurations: Reflections on Dynamic Relations between Local Movements and Social Movements,” *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (2017): 227, <https://doi.org/10.1111/aeq.12209>.
- 44 Marjorie Faulstich Orellana, “Solidarity, Transculturality, Educational Anthropology, and (the Modest Goal of) Transforming the World,” *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (2017): 216, <https://doi.org/10.1111/aeq.12207>.
- 45 Ruth Kinna, “Utopianism and Prefiguration,” in *Political Uses of Utopia*, edited by James D. Ingram and S. D. Chrostowska (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 8.

allow us to practice ideas about what the future can hold—in experiments in the present. Groups can use techniques that stage a momentary, full-scale performance of a more just future.

In an example of art as world-building, a large-scale art project staged a prefigurative, experiential future for a neighborhood in transition in Indianapolis, a medium-sized city located in the central United States.<sup>46</sup> Titled PreEnact Indy, the community and the artists transformed their struggling area into a vibrant vision of itself in the future. To make futures tangible, they developed PreEnactment theater, which “envisions a neighborhood that OUGHT to be—just, equitable, and economically vibrant.”<sup>47</sup> They invite people to “engage with actors who will perform an equitable way of living and model a neighborhood that is revitalized but is also inclusive.”<sup>48</sup> For one day, the team invites residents and others to enjoy a festival “from the near future” to see what it looks like when a community grows and thrives through its own ideas rather than outside influences. Prefiguring demonstrates Buckminster Fuller’s proposal: “You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.”<sup>49</sup> This orientation makes an alternative way of living feel appealing and possible.

#### Prompts for prefiguring:

- Can we imagine an exemplary moment in our equitable future? What ritual, event, or everyday activity could demonstrate how a better future might look and feel?
- What elements of a new world feel most enticing? How might we create enactments of those moments to engage people in our vision?
- What elements of a new world feel most daunting? How could we create enactments of those moments to ease people’s fears about our vision?

#### *Pre-enactment (Iterating Solutions)*

Similar in its focus on rehearsing an alternative world, pre-enactment differs from prefigurative in its orientation toward iteration rather than demonstration. Also known as pre-hearsing, this is an emerging practice in futures studies.<sup>50</sup> It has collaborators create full-scale interactive experiences that allow groups to learn by creating a prototype of the future for themselves. FoAM defines this aspect of their work as “direct experiences where future scenarios . . . can be explored in an immersive situation.”<sup>51</sup> Members of FoAM add detail, “These experiments provide temporary, relatively safe, delineated zones for testing visions of the future as experiential prototypes.”<sup>52</sup> In exploring risk and public perceptions, Francesca Laura Cavallo used pre-enactments to help people pre-experience environmental disasters to lessen their anticipatory fears.<sup>53</sup> In the same way, I imagine using pre-enactment to

46 Domenica Bongiovanni, “This Event Wants to Show How a Neighborhood Can Be Revitalized without Forgetting its Past,” *Indy Star*, October 5, 2017; Kris Taylor, “Pre-enactment: A Way to Create the Future You Want,” *Evergreen Leadership*, May 25, 2017, <https://evergreenleadership.com/2017/05/25/pre-enactment-a-way-to-create-the-future-you-want/>.

47 “PreEnact Indy,” *Harrison Center*, <https://www.harrisoncenter.org/preenact-indy> (accessed October 2, 2023).

48 *Ibid.*

49 Lloyd Steven Sieden, *A Fuller View: Buckminster Fuller’s Vision of Hope and Abundance for All* (Milton Keynes, UK: Divine Arts, 2012), 358.

50 FoAM, “Pre-enactments.”

51 *Ibid.*

52 Maja Kuzmanovic and Nik Gaffney, “Enacting Futures in Postnormal Times,” *Futures* 86 (2017): 108, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2016.05.007>.

53 Francesca Laura Cavallo, “Rehearsing the Disaster: Pre-enactment between Reality and Fiction,” *London Consortium*, September 2011, [https://www.academia.edu/8720974/Rehearsing\\_the\\_Disaster\\_pre-enactment\\_between\\_reality\\_and\\_fiction\\_INTRODUCTION](https://www.academia.edu/8720974/Rehearsing_the_Disaster_pre-enactment_between_reality_and_fiction_INTRODUCTION).

reduce anxiety and fear of significant social change. For example, groups might learn by prototyping new modes of policing without declaring final recommendations.

Prototypes help us test assumptions about how things will work, to get out of our heads and into something we can interact with—the earlier, the better. An approach of creating, enacting, and gathering feedback can be used in social justice. With the mindset of prototyping, we have permission to treat our suggestions and projects as experiments for learning.

Experimenting and understanding are already happening with methods of reparations and police reform. Mariame Kaba takes this approach to her organizing for prison abolition. She writes, “None of us has all of the answers . . . but if we keep building the world we want, trying new things, and learning from our mistakes, new possibilities emerge.”<sup>54</sup> A key benefit of pre-enactment is testing ideas at a small, experiential scale before requesting larger budgets and more comprehensive implementation. Prototypes and pilots can gather data about usage and identify essential improvements.

For example, an alternative policing program in the U.S. city of Oakland, California, MACRO, has been set up as a prototype to learn from the experience of responding to 911 calls differently.<sup>55</sup> Rather than police with guns deployed for every call to emergency services, as is currently the standard practice, the MACRO project responds to nonviolent calls with trained service workers instead. It is a small-scale but fully functional experience of nonarmed responses to calls for help. Citizens, lawmakers, police leadership, and advocates are learning at every stage of imagining, proposing, convincing, gathering funding, planning, setting up, going live, and observing how the practice works in real life. Because groups cannot expect to get everything exactly right on the first try, prototyping can mitigate risk through backup plans and extra hands.

Pre-enactments are a way to gain a shared understanding of the problem space and the proposed solutions. Pre-enacting can start small, such as skits or bodystorming activities where brainstorming about the future happens by acting out ideas with simple props.<sup>56</sup> That is the simplest first step to test assumptions and uncover the unexpected details—scaling up to more realistic settings over time as ideas gain confidence. It can also be a way to incorporate concerns from opponents—trying out different approaches early before scaling. Putting these ideas out into the world for small groups of people to experience and respond to iteratively can build enthusiasm and teach us how to make the concepts better.

54 Mariame Kaba, *We Do This 'til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021), 4.

55 Urban Strategies Council, “Report on Feasibility and Implementation of a Pilot of Mobile Assistance Community Responders of Oakland (MACRO),” 2020, [https://www.us-amsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Copy-of-jj-USC\\_MACRO-Report\\_062220.pdf](https://www.us-amsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Copy-of-jj-USC_MACRO-Report_062220.pdf).

56 Sih, Carey, and Lin, “Getting from Vision to Reality.”

Prompts for pre-enactment:

- What elements of our future vision can we learn more about through rehearsal? Or through prototyping elements of the concept?
- What are the most controversial aspects of our proposal? How can we build experiments to explore these concerns?
- How can we invite others into a full-scale experience of the future we envision? What would it look like to experience this world for five minutes or one hour? In one small location? A specific set of roles?

### **Conclusions on Evoking the Future**

Design approaches can help frame, perform, and prototype visions of better worlds. This framework seeks to demonstrate how designs for social impact can support the visions that already exist in the deep work of advocacy. This list of practices extends the work of participatory and experiential futures and demonstrates how making things material and specific can support change-making, transforming our imaginings into elements of communication and enactment can make them feel more attainable.

Simplification is an important aspect of how these actions harness a portion of the future world. Instead of having to construct a whole blueprint of a better social system, this framework invites small steps. Some participants expressed relief at the smaller scale that the orientations support. Advocates do not have to build their whole future world. They can practice an element or aspect of their proposal.

Visions of ideal future possibilities are often overlooked in favor of tactical next steps. This framework provides a way to stay with bold visions and do more with them beyond mission statements. Advocates for justice efforts can make use of a preferred future as a tool that motivates and enlists others in change-making. Each orientation in this framework can create specific expressions of a better future to help audiences engage with new ideas—to feel closer to those futures, believe they are possible, or actively try out and improve execution. In that way, this approach invites advocates—people working to make specific change in the world—to take their visions seriously and invite others into that better future.