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Instantiating Imaginactivism: Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* as Inspiration

Joan Haran

Abstract: This article introduces the concept of imaginactivism to investigate the ways in which interpretive and activist communities are formed, inspired and reinvigorated by fictional cultural production. Several instantiations of imaginactivism, including a film pitch, a collection of short stories, and a panel organized for the Tiptree Symposium are discussed.

Introduction

When the planning began for the December 2016 Tiptree Symposium at the University of Oregon, it might reasonably have been imagined that in addition to celebrating the life and work of Ursula K. Le Guin it would have served as a celebration for the election of the first woman President of the United States. Nonetheless, as organizers^[i] we were keen to focus on the capacity for imagining the world otherwise that Le Guin's fiction embodies, because the incumbency of President Obama had in no way marked the end to struggles for social justice either within the confines of the US or globally. The Black Lives Matter movement, the assembled water protectors at Standing Rock and the intersections of their resistance vividly demonstrated that racial, economic and environmental justice were still sorely lacking in the US. By the time the event came around, however, the outcome of the presidential election had raised new concerns about what political struggles might need to be rejoined. Eleven months into the new administration (at the time of going to press), the need for resources to underpin our political imaginations is starkly evident.^[ii]

Since 2014, I have been working with the concept 'imaginactivism' to think through, and to investigate the ways in which interpretive and activist communities are formed, inspired and / or reinvigorated by fictional cultural production. I coined the term strategically,^[iii] but, aptly enough, it does seem to capture people's imaginations. I believe it encourages the reader to fill it with meaning and to try it on for size. Is it a descriptive noun? Is it an injunction—"Imagine Activism!"? Does its meaning lean more

towards imagining or activism or does this compound word usefully embody their entanglement; an entanglement that often goes un(re)marked?

For me, the concept of imaginactivism offers another way to think about and / or account for what I would call the utopian impulse – the desire to move towards a concrete or everyday utopia (Cooper 2014)—and its expression. This alternative is necessary in part because of the resistance to the language of utopia by some of those whose projects I would regard as utopian. According to Ruth Levitas, “concrete utopia embodies what Bloch claims as the essential utopian function, that of simultaneously anticipating and effecting the future” (1997, 67). In my research I am exploring cultural interventions that attempt to embody that simultaneity of anticipating and effecting a future of racial, economic and environmental justice. As I’ve developed this research project I have also begun to think more about the ways in which the infrastructural work that I do with colleagues and collaborators is an instantiation of imaginactivism. That is, in creating opportunities to disseminate the work of others and in bringing together members of imagined and activist communities that might not otherwise have occasion to meet, we are increasing the potential for necessary change. In this article, I will elaborate on what I mean by imaginactivism, outline some examples or instantiations, and conclude by situating the contributions of adrienne maree brown and Grace Dillon in relation to the networked communities from which their imaginactivism arises and to which it returns.

Defining and Deploying Imaginactivism

Imaginactivism is—perhaps self-evidently—a compound word made up of Imagine and Activism, but intended to connote the process relationship between imagining and acting to make change in the world. The coinage is intended to signal a positive and effective relationship between creating and sharing visions of a better world that is possible and being moved by those visions to take practical action. It also suggests that we value imagining and imagination as an active process of crafting a vision that is a necessary precursor to worldly action, and sharing it with and in a community of ideas. The temporality of that relationship might work differently; our shared visions might emerge from the actions we take, or they might co-emerge or be co-created, but the important point is that we don’t regard the practice of imagining as simply escape or retreat from the world. I position my work on imaginactivism in the game of cat’s cradle that Haraway has variously identified with “Science Studies, Feminist Theory, Cultural Studies” (1994) “Science Fiction, Speculative Fabulation” (2011) and other

variants of what Katie King calls science fiction feminisms (Haran and King 2013). As Haraway notes:

The point is, in short, to make a difference — however modestly, however partially, however much without either narrative or scientific guarantees. In more innocent times, long ago, such a desire to be worldly was called activism. I prefer to call these desires and practices by the names of the entire, open array of feminist, multicultural, antiracist technoscience projects. (Haraway 1994, 62)

In my previous work on utopia, I have worked with the definition of “struggle forever” taken from Kim Stanley Robinson’s novel *Pacific Edge*, to convey the sense that utopia is something you do, not simply a static vision of an ideal state, and imaginactivism is a coinage intended to do similar work. In *Pacific Edge*, utopia is characterized as: “the process of making a better world, the name for one path history can take, a dynamic, tumultuous, agonizing process, with no end. Struggle forever” (Robinson 1995, 81). Both imaginactivism and this characterization of utopia are kin to Haraway’s use of “worlding” which refers to the entangled processes of imagining/making worlds and being imagined/made up by worlds.

Empirical Instantiations of Imaginactivism

In working to fill out the concept empirically, my current research focuses on the way in which interpretive—and perhaps activist—communities are formed, inspired and / or reinvigorated by fictional cultural production. My initial case study was the ongoing attempt by Starhawk and a team of producers to adapt her ecofeminist utopian novel *The Fifth Sacred Thing* for the screen. The short story collection *Octavia’s Brood*, edited by adrienne maree brown and Walidah Imarisha, soon became an additional case study. In both cases, the process of production makes apparent the collective work of imagining and making a cultural object, as well as the way that the possibilities offered by social media and new funding platforms enable creators to influence the circulation and distribution of their visions more directly.

The producers of the proposed film adaptation of *The Fifth Sacred Thing* reached out to fans of the novel to back them on Kickstarter, in 2011, so that they could put together a compelling pitch package for the movie, while, in 2013, the editors of *Octavia’s Brood* not only crowdsourced funding for their book’s production, through Indiegogo, but they incubated the stories from social justice activists in workshops, and built into their publication plan a tour of US cities which would enable them to facilitate additional

visionary fiction workshops with social justice activists. In both these cases, many people invested money, hope and time in the possibility of creating a new cultural intervention — in one case a feature film, in the other an edited collection of short stories.

I am developing these case studies because I believe that the form of the cultural intervention in each case is pertinent. Both Starhawk and the editors of *Octavia's Brood*, Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown, pursue multiple avenues in which they share their visions of environmental, economic and racial justice. All three engage in a complex assemblage of writing, presenting and teaching practices, but the backers of their Kickstarter and Indiegogo campaigns in each case wanted to see the creation of a particular cultural artifact that would be available to themselves as viewers or readers. They also wanted that artifact—a film or a collection of short stories—to be available to a wider audience outside the network of backers. Starhawk, adrienne maree brown, and Walidah Imarisha all function as public intellectuals through their blogging, journalism and teaching both inside and outside the academy. However, in these particular instances, their backers weren't supporting them to continue this work in general, but to produce a bounded text of some description that would constitute an object around which to gather additional viewers / readers / fans / potential activists.

As already noted, the Indiegogo campaign for *Octavia's Brood* included the plan “to fund a national tour where we will not only do readings of the anthology, but writing workshops and organizing strategy sessions where we can support communities turning their visionary ideas into concrete action!” (2013) In a similar vein, the Kickstarter campaign for *The Fifth Sacred Thing* film set out its producers' intentions should they be successful in producing the film:

We'll bring resources into the inner city by networking with community organizations with whom we have longstanding relationships. We'll put up a website with extensive resources and develop many ways that people who are inspired by the vision can learn the skills they need to create it and connect with others who share it. We want the movie to help nurture and support the movements that are already growing to put our world on a path of peace, justice and ecological harmony (*The Fifth Sacred Thing* 2011).

The phenomenon of fan activism does not depend on these kinds of pathways being set out by creators, but Starhawk., *et al* and Imarisha and brown have endeavored to

leverage their own participation in social movement and activism to enroll viewers and readers in worldbuilding projects beyond the boundaries of the texts they have funded. They are intentionally setting out to provide resources that will empower others to take action for social change, and they offer fiction as one of these resources because of the ways in which they themselves have drawn upon it.

An Extended Web of Imagination and Action

Of course, this entanglement of imagination and action is not limited to discrete interventions and the responses they elicit. As the Tiptree Symposium demonstrated, the works of Ursula Le Guin continue to offer inspiration to action to many, far beyond their original publication dates. Similarly, they contribute to her own status as a public intellectual as well as a beloved elder in the feminist science fiction community, resulting in extensive engagement with any of Le Guin's public interventions – in blogs, interviews or award acceptance speeches, for example. However, my research attempts to temporarily bound a network of objects and relationships to tease out what it is that moves somebody to contribute funds and / or to invest hope as they constitute themselves as stakeholders in bringing a particular cultural product to completion. I'm curious about the extent to which they understand those cultural products as part and parcel of political projects in which they are also invested. Each intervention depends upon and attempts to call forth an imagined public or audience that is invested in particular visions of a better world that is possible. **[iv]**

In each case study, each instantiation of imaginactivism, the particular object must be understood as a cut through a much more complex network or web of relationships between texts, readers and a range of communities of practice. As adrienne maree brown (2017) notes in *Emergent Strategy*: “Lineage is both important for me to name, and impossible to track” (25). In the lineage she gives for her concept of “emergent strategy” which she elsewhere refers to in a shorthand fashion as arising from her readings of Octavia Butler's science fiction, she also lists family, movement, friends and co-workers and a number of other writers, but Octavia Butler's work seems to crystallize for her some of the inspiration that she is moved to share through her writing, activism and writing about activism. adrienne reflects on her writing process:

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

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

That's true of almost everyone I reference — this book is not about analyzing other people's books or work. If you want more, go read the people and books I reference, and then consume the works they reference. I want to move forward from where others ended, or at least from the point of impact between their work and my own. (37-8)

In her frank address to her reader, adrienne captures for me some of what I'm striving to conceptualize through the term "imaginactivism." The language of "the point of impact between their work and my own" suggests that her work is moved by the work of, for example, Butler. So perhaps we could imagine the impact of a billiard ball which sets another ball in motion, perhaps on a desired trajectory, and perhaps, if miscued, on a random or undesirable one. Or we could think of the impact as one of a pebble thrown into a pool and the ripples that eddy from it. Or we might imagine a different kind of impact altogether—a less ballistic one—with brown's fingers glancing off Butler's (or perhaps Le Guin's) as she lifts the cat's cradle string figure from her hands and creates another pattern from which brown's readers might take inspiration or refigure once again.

Staging the Panel

If we can think of the work of enrolling the audience for a proposed film adaptation or short story collection as instantiations of imaginactivism, perhaps we could also consider the work of assembling a symposium as another. The December 2016 Tiptree Symposium at the University of Oregon celebrating Ursula Le Guin was the third major event since 2013 at the University of Oregon focusing on feminist science fiction. From experience, we anticipated that the audience would be a mix of academics and the writers, publishers, and fans that make up feminist science fiction communities. In the case of feminist science fiction, the iterative quality of imaginactivism becomes very clear. The symposium attracted multiple intersecting communities with histories and relationships that significantly precede this particular instantiation. Knowing that this would be an extremely well-read and highly politicized audience, inviting panelists to deliver a highly polished close reading of Le Guin's work seemed to be redundant. Further, bearing in mind the alternating despondency and anger provoked by the outcome of the recent presidential election in this temporarily assembled community, it

seemed important to explore the ways in which her fiction might help them reimagine possibility.

As Samuel Delany noted in “To Read *The Dispossessed*”: “A study of a genre that includes only a description of books must be a limited one. Any full exploration must cover the impact of those books on readers and writers” (2011, 161). In my research I am interested in the “impact(s) of those books” in readers’ lives beyond any interpretation of or satisfaction with the text as bounded by its narrative arc or the time-bound experience of a single reading of a novel. I want to know how people use books and how and why books make themselves useful, beyond reading pleasure. So I invited adrienne maree brown and Grace Dillon to talk about the ways in which reading Le Guin’s work moved them and the reasons they were open to that movement, believing that in the process they would move their audience. (Spoiler alert: they did!)

In preparing for the panel, I reread *The Dispossessed* and *The Word for World is Forest*, as well as some of Le Guin’s own essays from *The Language of the Night* and—at the urging of Debbie Notkin—Samuel Delany’s essay, “To Read *The Dispossessed*.” I shared the Delany essay with adrienne and Grace and suggested that they might want to (re)read it in preparation for the panel. In terms of the objective of shifting the mood of our audience, neither of the Le Guin novels are consoling fictions, but they offer their readers thoughtful explorations of the ways in which social justice and environmental justice are entangled and the ways in which politics are inseparable from ethics, serving as vital resources for developing robust approaches to contesting contemporary injustices. It seemed to me that these aspects of Le Guin’s work were likely to have made an impact on both panelists I invited. In an email that I sent to them ahead of the panel, I wrote:

I’ve reread the two novels recently and been struck by the ways in which some of the incidents in them and / or some of the language used by point-of-view characters seems to point to the importance of rereading them in our current historical and political situation.

For example, in *The Dispossessed* (the) episode where the young men ‘play’ at creating a prison (resonating with Milgram’s experiments,^[v] but also reminding contemporary readers of other human rights abuses associated with the carceral imagination and racist policing practices) or the episode describing the brutal suppression of the demonstration in Capitol Square in A-ia seem all too like contemporary events or near-future possibilities. In *The Word for World is Forest*,

our access to the internal world of Captain Davidson and the crude expression of his racism, speciesism, sexism etc. and the way in which that is linked with an extractive, instrumentalist view of the material world seems only too resonant with the world-view behind the Dakota Access Pipeline and the militarized police response to the water protectors.

So I'm curious about your own experiences of reading the novels and the ways in which they have provoked you (italics in original email). (personal correspondence)

The panel title was “Le Guin’s Fiction as Inspiration for Activism” because I wanted to be absolutely explicit about the hope that many of us have when we turn to feminist science fiction, and the ways in which Le Guin’s work repays that hope. I asked adrienne and Grace to consider speaking about *The Dispossessed* and *The Word for World is Forest* in relation to their own activisms and contemporary social justice organizing, but in the event, we only had time to discuss *The Dispossessed*. Although *The Word for World is Forest* wasn’t discussed explicitly, I want to register that it formed part of the context for the development of the panel. The novel’s exploration of the violence and profiteering of colonialism, written partially in response to the Vietnam War, seemed to resonate so strongly with what had been going on in Standing Rock since the summer of 2016 that it couldn’t help but be part of our understanding of the vital contribution made by Le Guin. **[vi]**

Our exchanges of emails in advance of the symposium were heartening in themselves. Both panelists were engaged and positive, with adrienne mentioning her work on emergent strategy and Grace mentioning indigenous futurisms and the Standing Rock Teach-In she was working on. My existing sense that fiction and activism were entangled for them both was reinforced in our snippets of conversation. I also mentioned that I’d seen both Winona LaDuke and Vandana Shiva give well-attended inspiring talks in Eugene so I was thinking of Le Guin’s ecological consciousness in a larger context of ecofeminist activism. I note these points because it seems to me that part of the work of imaginactivism is in the way we weave together the inspiration we derive from fiction with resources we gather elsewhere and share them, and the work we do with them, with each other. Further, both LaDuke and Shiva are consummate storytellers.

Thinking with Le Guin

I invited adrienne and Grace to think with Le Guin in this way because I knew that they were both already engaged with movements that took the role of the imagination and creative production seriously as part and parcel of activism. Their respective work with visionary fiction—science fiction from social justice workers—and indigenous futurism explicitly contests the white supremacist status quo through offering alternative visions and also through the mutual support of their communities of practice. They also both demonstrate their appreciation of feminist science fiction genealogies beyond the movements whose work they support. So I was confident that they would respond to the invitation that Delany identifies in “To Read *The Dispossessed*”: “All in the book that asks us to take it as a novel of ideas also asks us to hold the novel up, however sensitively, intelligently and at the proper angle, to the real” (2011, 108).

I chose *The Dispossessed* as a springboard for discussion that moved beyond the text itself because like many utopian / dystopian fictions it seemed particularly pertinent in a moment when public discourse's competition over imagined futures was (and remains) virulent, and yet it requires its readers to engage actively with the text if it is to help them make sense of their contemporary predicament. The assembled audience would likely have engaged thus when (if) they read the novel themselves, but I thought the specificity of Grace and adrienne's engagements were important to share. As already noted, I had hoped that we might talk about *The Word for World is Forest*. However, our time was limited so we focused on *The Dispossessed*. It should be explicitly recognized that this limited / limiting frame risks excluding—or at least occluding—the worlds that each reader brings to any text, including other works by the same author, other fictional and non-fictional texts and the many communities of discourse to which any reader belongs and contributes (indeed Grace referred to Le Guin's essays). The focus on a single text, nonetheless, gives us an opportunity to think through / talk through some of the ways that we are moved by texts and our readings of them. In my email to adrienne and Grace, I invited them to explore their own dialogues with *The Dispossessed* and other Le Guin works, asking: “How much of their impact on you is about you as reader, and how much about you as writer, how much about (you) as member of communities?” I also invited them to reframe the question if they preferred.

Both adrienne and Grace opened their talks by locating themselves in resistant communities—Grace speaking of the pacifist anarchist native-founded community in which she was raised and adrienne of her current home in Detroit a “post-apocalyptic city” where “black and brown people have been experimenting with other ways of

being in this world—after capitalism, under capitalism, in direct resistance to capitalism,” suggesting that they understand their reading and writing practices, and indeed activism, to be inseparable from the collectives to which they belong (their own contributions to this issue flesh that out more fully).

Inventing Our Lives

Le Guin (2004) herself argues that: “All of us have to learn how to invent our lives, make them up, imagine them. We need to be taught these skills; we need guides to show us how. If we don't, our lives get made up for us by other people” (208). This is why literacy is so important, she adds because: “literature is the operating instructions. The best manual we have. The most useful guide to the country we're visiting, life” (210). I asked adrienne and Grace how these claims resonated with their readings of Le Guin's fiction and with their own work of writing, teaching, editing and activism.

adrienne's response to this at the symposium wove in her sense of Le Guin as a surprising kindred spirit, of reading *The Dispossessed* as a call to action and finding in the text an exploration of anarchist philosophy that she wanted to share with both self-identified anarchists and critics. She also directly related the challenges that Shevek faces in the novel to her own challenges as a writer of visionary fiction and an activist and drew out what she thinks are the key questions that it illuminates about the self-transformation and responsibility required to make the better worlds we imagine. In terms of parsing the components of my term imaginactivism she also pointed to the necessity of avoiding the temptation of retreating into the work of visionary writers like Le Guin and Butler, but instead using them as departure points to assert our own visions of the future and taking responsibility for creating it.

Grace's response linked her interest in *The Dispossessed* to her own upbringing in a pacifist anarchist community and moved quickly to discussing the activism of water protectors and discussing the entanglement of theory with practice. She drew comparisons between the decision-making processes in indigenous communities with those on Anarres and suggested that to her Le Guin's thinking feels indigenous. She also celebrated the ways in which fiction enables the sharing of visions which can serve as jumping-off points for further imagining.

I won't elaborate further on adrienne and Grace's contributions to the Symposium as you can read them in their own words, but I wanted to draw attention to the ways in which their respective engagements with *The Dispossessed* were iterative, entangled in

their membership of communities, and mobilized the text in service of their worldly projects rather than searching for a definitive meaning. On the day of the Tiptree Symposium, their communication of this sense of movement was palpable; audience members repeatedly expressed their renewed hope and commitment to social and political change. When I was facilitating this conversation, I had not yet consciously conceived of it as an instantiation of imaginactivism. However, I hope that in elaborating the conception of the panel I facilitated, I have provided one demonstration of the process relationship between imagining and acting to make change in the world, and the ways in which it depends on working actively and collaboratively with a shared vision.

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[i] Members of the Tiptree Symposium organizing committee: Joan Haran, Linda Long, Ben Saunders, Philip Scher and Carol Stabile. Edmond Chang and Alexis Lothian organized individual panels.

[ii] I refer to US politics because that is the national context in which the symposium was staged. Of course, the US is not alone in facing urgent political challenges.

[iii] I coined the term imaginactivism because I thought it was a way to capture the attention of potential research funders when I proposed my current research project to the European Commission for a second time:

http://cordis.europa.eu/project/rcn/196122_en.html.

[iv] In my forthcoming book project, additional case studies will include WisCon, “the world’s leading feminist science fiction convention” and The James Tiptree Junior

Literary Award, given annually since 1992 to a work of speculative fiction which explores or expands notions of gender

[v] I conflated Stanley Milgram's experiments on obedience to authority (from 1961 through early 1970s) with Philip Zimbardo's 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment.

[vi] Of course, the gathered tribes and non-Native allies resolutely avoided the turn to violence that is the Athshean's fate in the novel.

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Joan Haran (<https://adanewmedia.org/author/joanharan2>)

Dr Joan Haran is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Global Research Fellow at the Center for the Study of Women in Society at the University of Oregon and the School of Journalism, Media & Cultural Studies, Cardiff University. In her European Commission funded research project; "Imaginactivism: Utopian Imaginaries, Cultural Production and Social and Political Action" she is developing several feminist science fiction case studies to test out the concept Imaginactivism which signifies the entanglement of fictional cultural production and social justice activism. Her book, *Genomic Fictions: Genes, Gender and Genre* is forthcoming from the University of Wales Press.



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