



Space to imagine. Strategies for action.

# Cluster Flocking to the Future

## *Building the Robust and Reparative Democracy We Deserve*

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*dedicated to  
the so many doing so much  
to preserve the possibilities  
of the just and joyful future  
we deserve*

## Introduction

The United States is no longer a democracy.<sup>1</sup> This condition is the outcome of a diverse set of movements working against the goal of achieving a multiracial, feminist democracy and of a flagging belief more broadly in the idea of democracy.

Our theories, tools, and practices of change in the United States have largely been built upon an assumption of a most basic degree of democratic process, and often also on a broad consensus formed by the New Deal and War on Poverty. These fundamental assumptions no longer hold.

This time is scary and enraging. Those of us who have furthered our nation's realization of its radical ideals of democracy may feel overwhelmed and underresourced. We may feel alone, precisely as we know that we need each other.

We can pick up the tools we have already at hand, but we also must innovate to meet the specific challenges of the moment.

## A Hopeful Hypothesis

In this paper, I make the argument that “we who believe in freedom”<sup>2</sup> should meet this current era with a vital set of experiments to test the following hypothesis:

If we have:

- a future-oriented disposition to the pro-democracy movement we need;
- diverse relationships among a flock of efforts to meet the needs and advance the priorities of our most targeted communities; and
- rigorous metrics and clear mile markers for our progress to our goal,

then we will win secure the robust and reparative democracy we deserve.

In this context, “robust and reparative democracy” is experienced in our governance, economy, and culture, and refers to a social relationship of mutuality and care, with the understanding that conflict is inevitable. It is not only a set of rules about the structures and processes of voting (though also that), but also an orientation to making decisions together with the knowledge that there will be conflict and disagreement, as well as a shared commitment to care for one another through that conflict and, when necessary, to repair harm caused by that conflict.

This provocation rests on a few understandings. We are pulled — by circumstance, training, and disposition — to focus our energy and attention on immediate and often important concerns. We are facing an extended wave of urgent crises that will pull us even further toward immediacy — and defensiveness — in our actions. That urgency challenges our ability to chart our path toward the world we mean to create. And, while we have to develop many of the capacities we need to create that world, we also need to meet this world with readiness, adaptability, and fight.

I offer this hypothesis in the hope that it will spark fulsome conversation and generative conflict to refine its crude proposition into sharp strategy and action in different corners of the pro-democracy movement.

In this introduction, I focus on the conditions that are agitating us toward greater urgency and away from testing this hypothesis. Our current context both challenges our attention to the long-term and offers an opportunity to nurture it. Our focus on the immediate (even when important) serves to concentrate power and agency in the hands of the already politically and economically powerful. The next section, “A systemic deprivation of the future,” makes that case.

In the “Future as a verb” section, I pivot to the underpinnings of the case for testing my hypothesis. And, “We need a flocking movement” offers an example of how a set of experiments could be scaffolded around pivotal compression moments. Spoiler alert: I offer no specific experiments here. This paper is an invitation to the field of people committed to a robust and reparative democracy to work together in the service of both keeping our communities safe and building our beautiful future.

## The Widening Gyre<sup>3</sup>

While many of our states and territories have long been laboratories for authoritarianism, it is new, for most people alive in the US today, to have such deep doubt that the other branches of the federal government will adequately check or balance the power of the president. We are in an era when our experiences of political, economic, and social instability characterize not conditions, but the very framework of our basic understandings of governance and the economy. This instability can seed a willingness to tolerate, if not outright support, antidemocracy and the extreme concentration and centralization of power in the hands of one leader or party (in other words, authoritarianism), in exchange for the promise of greater certainty. We find ourselves once again with a president who seeks power through intimidation<sup>4</sup> and retribution,<sup>5</sup> and who fashions enemies from among his constituents.

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In today’s widening gyre,<sup>A</sup> people committed to a robust and reparative democracy are pulled to meeting the most immediate needs of our communities, particularly safety and security, food, shelter, and health. With our eyes on the threats and our muscles trained by funding patterns and policy campaigns for tight one-, two-, or four-year cycles, we shore up our communities and map our way across the riptides. This work is vital to achieving the holistic democracy we deserve. Yet, it is insufficient.

The riptides we are caught in are not naturally occurring. As sociologist Ruha Benjamin writes, they are instead a function of, “the deadly imaginations and social orders that are

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<sup>A</sup> According to the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#), “a gyre is a large system of rotating ocean currents.” Yeats adopted “gyre,” which he understood to be cones moving in competing directions, to describe the prevailing dialectics between historical eras. The gyres overlap and, as Yeats writes in [A Vision](#), as one diminishes, the other increases (p 68). The widening gyre is the force that is gaining strength, but its coincidence with the diminishing gyre creates tumult.

killing us but experiment and play with new prescriptions, visions, and forms of social organization.”<sup>6</sup> These urgent conditions created by structures of concentrated power — and the people leveraging and benefiting from them — strip current resources and future power from their targets, from us. They are realizations and experiments of hostile imaginations spanning decades.

## “Time is money”<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, if the present is money, that generation-spanning spectrum of history is capital. According to one finance study guide, “One of the primary functions of money is to serve as a medium of exchange. It facilitates the exchange of goods and services between buyers and sellers.” “Capital,” on the other hand, “is a longer-term store of value that is used to invest in long-term assets such as buildings, equipment, and technology. Unlike money, capital is not used in day-to-day transactions but is instead used to create wealth over a more extended period of time.”<sup>8</sup>

In a campaign orientation, we build our people power too often to spend it down in vital fights for policy wins that materially improve the lives of people who have been harmed. This kind of approach depletes us in the best of times, putting us into a situation where we must negotiate against ourselves over which issues or policies we prioritize.<sup>B</sup> The observation over the past many years that our communities are “winning policies but losing power” voices the limitations of this approach.

A movement disposition draws from the past through the present to build the future. As John Berger has written,

A movement describes a mass of people collectively moving towards a definite goal, which they either achieve or fail to achieve. Yet such a description ignores, or does not take into account, the countless personal choices, encounters, illuminations, sacrifices, new desires, griefs and, finally, memories, which the movement brought about, but which are, in the strict sense, incidental to that movement.

The promise of a movement is its future victory; whereas the promises of the incidental moments are instantaneous.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>B</sup> For an earlier articulation of this argument, see Connie Razza, “[Planting an Orchard](#),” LPE Project Blog (October 15, 2020, accessed March 17, 2025).

To meet shifting conditions with resilience and readiness, fully leverage the opportunities that might arise (including in the face of the current challenges and crises), and build our robust and reparative democracy, we need a different way of being in the present to pull from the past and build the future. We have to reclaim the right to future-spanning imagination and we must honor the responsibility to practice *futuring*.

## A systemic deprivation of the future

Our use of technology to create ever-faster cycles of new content (not necessarily knowledge) agitates us toward a present-centrism. This amped-up focus on the present is just one recent, salient example in a long trajectory depriving us of the fulsome context of our place in history — both the history that has happened and the history that is yet to be.

*We need a different way of being in the present to pull from the past and build the future.*

Even our concept of the future is most often something more like a “future present” tense — a snapshot of a moment, rather than an accumulation of the time from now to then. (An exception here might be in considerations of climate impacts.) Consider the global population, currently around eight billion people. By 2100, the UN estimates that there will be 10.4 billion people on the earth.<sup>10</sup> But how many people will live and die between now and then? How many will have been born and died entirely in between the dates of those snapshots), and what are their stories?<sup>11</sup>

### Jeremy Bearimy<sup>c</sup>

Stewart Brand, an author perhaps best known for founding the *Whole Earth Catalog*, makes an argument that we should lengthen our understanding of “now” to encompass hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Such a “long now,” as he terms it, would expand our sense of our grounding, smooth our most immediate conflicts of self-interest, and focus us on more global and shared interests. He asserts, “Time is asymmetrical for us. We can see the past but not influence it. We can influence the future but not see it.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>c</sup> In The Good Place season 3, episode 4 (2018), we learn that there is not really a past or future or present in the hereafter. The eternal time-space-line is, instead, a shape that most resembles “Jeremy Bearimy” written in cursive. It loop-de-loops, curves, and turns back on itself. What is behind is also ahead. Like it and not, we are in a time when the certainties proposed by the Enlightenment—objective, singular, authoritative, and linear—are eroding.

His project compels, and his formulation of time's asymmetry attracts; but ultimately, both fail. They oversimplify our relationship to the past and fail to adequately account for our discoveries about the past that change what we understand and for the ways we deliberately reshape the telling of history to create, buttress, or undermine existing power relationships. His argument obscures what is visible of the future and the imbalances that amplify or dampen different people's influence on it.

It is not *time* that is asymmetrical for us, but *power*.

People with access to abundant power routinely and disproportionately influence both the future and the past,<sup>D</sup> and stand a better chance to see both.<sup>E</sup> One could perhaps argue that the past itself is stable, but it is only history — the telling of those events and *which* telling prevails (a function of power) — that permits us access to the past. This is why the continuing study of history is important,<sup>F</sup> why curriculum and book-ban fights are so critical, and why the current president executed an order "Ending" so-called "Radical Indoctrination in K-12 Schooling" in his first 10 days and included the re-establishment of the 1776 Commission to "promote patriotic education."<sup>13</sup>

"American" identity in the United States is created out of many ruptured histories — the forced ruptures of European's genocides and displacements of Native Americans; the Middle Passage and the enslavement of Africans, and the stripping of their history to convert them into Blacks;<sup>G</sup> but also, the foundational flight of European religious outcasts, the rebellion of British colonists against their monarch, and the ongoing choices that immigrants and children of immigrants report having to make to leave behind their ethnic and national histories in order to survive, convert themselves into Americans, and thrive in the United States.<sup>14</sup>

The differences in these ruptures are significant. Some of the ruptures were enforced and relatively complete; others were compelled but recoverable; still others were

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<sup>D</sup> Cue "Wonderful" from *Wicked* (written by Stephen Schwartz, 2003), sung by Joel Grey as the Wizard: "Elphaba, where I'm from, we believe all sorts of / Things that aren't true, we call it 'history.'"

<sup>E</sup> Need I cite the oft-cited William Gibson quote: "The future is already here – it's just not evenly distributed"?

<sup>F</sup> For example, in his intervention into accepted historiography, Cedric Robinson notes that history is shaped by the political and economic power dynamics of the time, as well as "the self-serving ideology of the bourgeoisie as the ruling class" (*Black Marxism*, 19).

<sup>G</sup> This notion of Africans being converted into Blacks is drawn from Cedric Robinson, as well. In *Black Marxism*, he demonstrates the erasure of European memory of the history both of Africa itself and of Europe's long relationship with Africa and Africans. Recasting enslaved people as Black is part of that dehistoricization, in service of dehumanization to grant deeper permission for chattel slavery.

aspirational. Yet, the work the ruptures do may be quite similar. Racialized genocide, land theft, and enslavement powered the rooting and propagation of capitalism; but these other historical ruptures enabled mutations of capitalism. Adopting a relatively homogenized American identity — tied up with a mythology of self-reliance and rugged individualism, and unfettered from history — lays important footing for the authoritarian load. As Jason Stanley, an expert on fascism, writes:

What does history do that is so disruptive of authoritarian goals? Perhaps most importantly, it provides multiple perspectives on the past. Authoritarianism's great rival, democracy, requires the recognition of a shared reality that contains multiple perspectives. Through exposure to multiple perspectives citizens learn to regard one another as equal contributors to a national narrative. And they learn, we learn, to accept that this narrative is open to continued collective reflection and re-imagination, constantly taking into account new ideas, new evidence, new perspectives and theoretical framings. History in a democracy is not static, not mythic, but dynamic and critical.<sup>15</sup>

For people whose power has been stripped, the dominant stories of both the past and the future suggest that we cannot influence them, even if we can see them. In other words, the past is set and the future is inevitable. All that we have is today...and today...and today.<sup>14</sup> In the short film, *Bubbling Over* (RKO, 1934), Ethel Waters hauntingly performs a song that captures the relationship to the future that constant crisis begets:<sup>16</sup>

Darkies never dream. / They must laugh and sing all day. / Can't forget your troubles / When you're thinking what they are.

....

Darkies never dream. / Wouldn't help to live that way. / We must walk a weary road / That never seems to turn. / What good would it do to yearn?

The film surrounds Waters' honest and industrious character with a diversity of embodied stereotypes of Black shiftlessness. The context of the Great Migration is present in the arrival of a new relative to the already crowded Harlem apartment and the long Southern drawls of the characters. But the song pulls the characters and viewers out of that context and into an eternal present. The only moment in the song when Waters looks up from her character's washing is when she sings about the relief of death. And while Waters imbues the lyrics with depth and resonance even 90 years later, the song and film

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<sup>14</sup> Cue "No Day but Today," *Rent* (songwriter: Jonathan D Larson), 1996: "I can't control my destiny / I trust my soul, my only goal / Is just to be // There's only now, there's only here..."



participate in a broad cultural and political project of stripping the future and, for that matter, the past from Black people.

As Cedric Robinson recovers in his groundbreaking study, “The construct of Negro, unlike the terms ‘African,’ ‘Moor,’ or ‘Ethiope’ suggested no situatedness in time, that is history, or space, that is ethno- or politico-geography.” He continues, “the creation of the Negro, the fiction of a dumb beast of burden fit only for slavery, was closely associated with the economic, technical, and financial requirements of Western development from the sixteenth century on.”<sup>17</sup> Stanley contributes, “When a group of people is represented as having no history, they are being denied any valid claim to the present.”<sup>18</sup> Being reimagined as outside of time — with no history and no claim on the present — we have limited access to the future. As I have helped facilitate numerous scenario exercises over the past 5 years, participants have routinely described the “luxury of looking to the future.” But I propose that it is a right that has been systemically stripped from too many of us by keeping us in a hand-to-mouth state of urgency.

*Activating our role in futuring is a creative act that throws a shoe in the works*

Being denied our right to the future contributes to a sense of the future as inevitable, a force of nature. This sensibility limits what we believe we can change. It obscures the active role that people with disproportionate power play in shaping the future; and it works to strip the sense of agency and motivation from people who have been targeted by those with disproportionate power. We take heart sometimes in a vision of the future moving inevitably toward our values, even as we recognize that our affirmative agency is needed to accelerate that progress.<sup>1</sup> For me, this progressive notion of the future conjures a particular metaphor — the factory line — which requires many hands but drives toward a predetermined output. Deeply resonant with a Western Enlightenment worldview, this understanding suggests that the future is a thing that is foreseeable.<sup>19</sup>

Activating our role in futuring is a creative act that throws a shoe in the works of this metaphor and opens a polyphony of imaginaries — myriad shapes, directions, and dimensions of our possible futures; new relationships to future-shaping that embrace life-affirming subjectivities; undermine notions of mastery, authority, and dominance; and concretize unknowable and unforeseeable futures to work, play, and rest toward. Futures to create and to practice. And, a drive to *do*.

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<sup>1</sup> Here, cue a particular reading of, “The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.” Martin Luther King, Jr, “Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution,” (March 31, 1968) [https://youtu.be/0ikgK0IYUAU?si=B\\_T3HdDEFIV4Clon](https://youtu.be/0ikgK0IYUAU?si=B_T3HdDEFIV4Clon) (accessed September 30, 2024)



# Future as a verb

That drive to act is a refusal of the efforts to deprive us of the future.<sup>1</sup>

Removing ourselves from hostile environments to more promising ones is an act of futuring. The furtive road to freedom for people escaping slavery, the weary road to industrial cities for people escaping Jim Crow, the harrowing roads over land and sea into the country for people navigating the political and economic tyrannies around the world — each step along these paths is a bold act of futuring. The Duke Ellington/Ella Fitzgerald collaboration of 1933, “Drop Me Off in Harlem,”<sup>20</sup> demonstrates this:

I don't want your Dixie, / You can keep your Dixie, / There's no one down in Dixie  
who can take me / 'Way from my hot Harlem.  
Harlem has those southern skies, / They're in my baby's smile, / I idolize my  
baby's eyes and / Classy up-town style.  
If Harlem moved to China, / I know of nothing finer, / Than to stow away on a  
plane, some day and have them / Drop me off in Harlem.

The agency of the creative process is reflected in the agency of the song's protagonist. She choicefully rejects the oppression of Jim Crow for liberty and love. As Ellington, Fitzgerald, et al created the piece, the protagonist creates within it: she and her love create a container for the memories of their Southern past that they can enjoy (and which cannot be stripped from them), and she creates a flight of fancy to show her flexibility to meet outlandish conditions (as she has already met outrageous ones) to ensure her liberty.

Protest, too, is an act of futuring. “The dispossessed have always had a fertile futuring muscle, which is seen in protest and acts of resistance.”<sup>21</sup> In his historiography, Robinson writes of the English working-class, “One quite obvious expression of working-class anger toward the impoverishment of their social lives and, as Hammond called it, ‘Imagination,’ is the movement to which Hobsbawm refers as the ‘machine breakers.’”<sup>22</sup>

## Why “futuring”

The word “future” comes to English through Old French from the Latin word *futurus*, a future participle of the verb *esse* (which means “to be”).<sup>23</sup> In English, we use “future” as an adjective (“a future condition”) or a noun (“the future”), but not a verb (“to future”).

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<sup>1</sup> In “Wanting Now,” John Berger reminds us, “Freedom without actions does not exist.”

Let's reactivate it.

Asserting, enacting, and defending the liberty, the right, and the responsibility to future is a critical step to actualizing the beautiful futures we desire, deserve, design, and demand. The current governance, economic, cultural, and social conditions drive so many of us — as individuals, organizations, and communities — to struggle just to meet our immediate needs. The crises focus us on the next steps we need to take, and too often we can find neither the space nor the grace to be able to imagine the joyful and just future that buoys us and supports our thriving. The urgency of crises deprives us of the time and space we need to future, to think and create ways of doing and being that step us into the future. And therefore, we cannot prepare for it or strategize for the challenges and opportunities we may face along the way as we chart our path toward it.

Crunched for time and deprived of futuring, we too often meet the conditions of today with the tools and structures of yesterday.

I draw on the tradition of Afrofuturism for a model.<sup>K</sup> Author and illustrator John Jennings writes, "Afrofuturism gives us a lens, and a title, through which we can reexamine and remix the past, present, and future simultaneously."<sup>24</sup>

This disposition to simultaneity is critical to futuring in the American context at large (though, certainly, particularly for African Americans). It is deeply related to hip-hop scratching and sampling, which draws on a deep archive of a broad range of contemporary and past music in order to create new music and to push into new dimensions of possibility.

*Crunched for time and deprived of futuring, we too often meet the conditions of today with the tools and structures of yesterday.*

Futuring is as vital and perhaps misunderstood as dreaming is. According to the Cleveland Clinic, "the prevailing theory is that dreaming helps you consolidate and analyze memories (like skills and habits) and likely serves as a 'rehearsal' for various situations and challenges that one faces during the daytime."<sup>25</sup> Yet, we often dismiss dreams as divorced from reality and sleep as an obstacle to achieving our goals.<sup>L</sup> Similarly, futuring functions to rehearse responses to various possible situations, analyze

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<sup>K</sup> By contrast, the Futurist movement, which was launched in the first decade of the twentieth century in Italy, celebrated dynamism, technological advancements, and liberating the present from the past. The movement was particularly attracted to violence and Italian Futurists supported fascism and were supported by it. This notion of the future as a break with the past is antithetical to the sense of futuring that I am proposing. ("Art term: Futurism," Tate (accessed December 7, 2024) and "Movements: Futurism," The Art Story (accessed December 7, 2024).)

<sup>L</sup> Cue "I'll Sleep When I'm Dead" Bon Jovi (1992) (and others).

past experiences for relevant insights, and identify gaps and strengths for meeting — and shaping—the conditions.

## We go where we look

This relationship to futuring encourages a hopeful disposition to both setting a destination (the future we want) and preparing to overcome the obstacles between here and there. Hope permits the recognition of dire conditions in the present and allows for skepticism that those conditions will better themselves, but it is powered by the ability of our clear purpose and our deliberate preparation to create the possibility for the conditions we deserve and the resources to them.<sup>26</sup> In contrast to the present-focus of mindfulness, hope “functions as a future-oriented state that helps people to reflect on one’s perceived ability to generate pathways around challenges.”<sup>27</sup>

A common saying when learning to move — to walk, bike, motorcycle, drive, ride horses — is to look where you want to go. When my younger son was learning to ride horses, his teacher put a log down for his horse to walk over. When my son looked at the log, the horse stopped short at the log, seeming to think they had reached their destination. They avoided the obstacle, but they did not keep on toward their goal. The intent of your gaze transmits and sets the course of your body, vehicle, or horse. The impulse in times of crisis is to look at the urgent challenge or threat — the log on the ground in front of us — instead of on our destination. Anchoring our focus here may seem appropriate and responsible and may help us avoid the worst possible future. But we won’t get to the world we mean to create that way.

On the other hand, we have a habit in our field of creating “north stars,” “visions” of the world we are seeking to create. It’s a powerful metaphor from traditions of liberation (i.e., Black folks escaping slavery would use the North Star as a guide), as well as other forms of navigation. The trouble with the metaphor is that it cedes the possibility of *achieving* that vision. The North Star is a reference for triangulating where I am and where I am heading, but it is not itself a destination. If we design our strategies with the world we want to create as a “north star,” we are not mapping the path toward it.

So, we should orient ourselves, with our north-star values, *toward* the world we mean to create with the foreseeable obstacles in mind, because the problem with “north stars” is not just literary. That sense of unattainability conveys in our dispositions and, like the horse my son was riding, we stop ourselves short of our destinations.

Since 2021, Future Currents has walked more than 200 movement leaders — across geographies, demographic differences, and roles within the US progressive ecosystem — through our Horizons scenario, which presented a dire 2032 and a more promising 2052, asking what capacities, roles, relationships, and infrastructure we need to stem a more repressive future and seed a more joyful and just future.<sup>28</sup> In almost all of the exercises we ran, the room filled with energy, emotion, tactics, and strategies for weathering the dire future; whereas, the beautiful 2052 — built largely from the north star statements of progressive organizations — sorted participants into three categories: feeling blank or numb, disbelieving the plausibility of being so close to attaining those visions, and contesting whether they represented the future we actually want.

The experience we had with our Horizons scenario suggests that the dire nearer future was more vivid and believable than the beautiful, further future — a function of the time span, to be sure. But participants articulated flavors of despair, of pervasive hopelessness, that “We can’t figure a way out of or through the struggle and the suffering.”<sup>29</sup>





## A flocking movement for our democracy

The United States is entering an era marked by an anti-democracy and anti-plurality system of governance and economy, characterized by the concentration and centralization of power in the hands of one leader or political party. The election could be understood as a tipping point in the federal backslide from democracy, but that backslide has taken many years and covered several administrations.<sup>30</sup> The administration is intensifying attacks on communities that are already disproportionately targeted — to say nothing of the crises that will unfold without particular agents (e.g., climate disasters). We must respond to these. But, the current conditions also unlock an opportunity to clarify together that the work of building the robust and reparative democracy we deserve is *long, varied, and foundational* work.

We are in a moment for bold steps, for leaps.



To revisit the hypothesis I am suggesting we test:

If we have

- a futuring disposition to the pro-democracy movement we need;
- diverse relationships between a flock of efforts; and
- rigorous metrics and clear mile markers for our progress to our goal,

then we will the just and joyful future we all deserve.

## Destination

A futuring disposition prompts us to understand ourselves to be in a generational movement for the robust and reparative democracy we deserve in our governance, economy, and culture. Again, by “democracy,” I am referring to a social relationship of mutuality and care, with the understanding that conflict is inevitable. It is not only a set of rules about the structures and processes of voting (though also that), but also an orientation to making decisions together with the knowledge that there will be conflict and disagreement, as well as a shared commitment to care for one another through that conflict and, when necessary, to repair harm caused by that conflict. I propose that robust and reparative democracy as our destination.<sup>M</sup>

Building to that requires that more of us imagine and experience today a new way of being and practicing democracy and American-ness. It will demand different and shared stories of who we are together and how we come together. And, it will take rigor and realism, as we map our path to our destination and reroute our way around obstacles.

We will need to set for ourselves clear opportunities to rigorously pressure test our strength together. Though these shared tests are critical for success, I am not proposing One Big Campaign, not a homogenization of work, roles, or methods. Instead I am inviting us to envision a cluster [flock of efforts](#) to meet the needs and advance the priorities of vulnerable communities — movements, organizing efforts, policy campaigns, upsurges, mutual aid, defensive fights, narrative and cultural interventions — that are in relationship with one another, but not tightly coordinated.

[T]he most impressive flockers are arguably those that form large, irregularly shaped masses, such as starlings, shorebirds, and blackbirds. They often fly at

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<sup>M</sup> Two important notes: (1) This (still overly broad) description of our destination will need to be refined over time with various inputs. I offer it as a provocation for a discussion of the world we mean to build. (2) This is not a messaging document; I am not proposing this as a rap on the doors. Before the messaging, the goal can be better defined.

speeds of 40 miles or more per hour, and in a dense group the space between them may be only a bit more than their body length. Yet they can make astonishingly sharp turns that appear, to the unaided eye, to be conducted entirely in unison.<sup>31</sup>

Cluster flocks form but do not “get into formation.”<sup>N</sup> They disintegrate and reintegrate, sometimes in response to obstacles or attackers. They swarm and they space. Sometimes a sub-flock will break off in a different direction or rejoin a bigger flock. Individuals may be part of the flock, but are not charged with tracking the entire flock; instead, each individual “simply coordinates its movements with those of its neighbors.”<sup>32</sup>

## Responding to crisis

We should plan for the continuing escalation of government-supported attacks on immigrant communities, trans youth and adults, and federal workers, and the expansion of those attacks to other vulnerable communities. As we continue responding to those that have already been crossed (e.g., stripping legal residency from dissenters, violating congressional intent and court orders, denying due process), we have to also prepare for coming crises — both those we can expect (e.g., the crossing of other redlines, economic crises, international conflicts, climate disasters) and those we cannot yet imagine.

*Cluster flocks form but do not “get into formation.”*

We will face crises outside our control, and they will harm many people. But our preparedness to meet people’s needs in those moments — including but not limited to their need to make sense of what’s going on — can grow people’s belief in the possibility and power of mutual care, help them build communities of belonging.

Grounding our responses in care and mutuality in the face of these crises is not about guaranteeing some kind of near-term “win.” Instead, it meets the real needs of our neighbors when they feel most vulnerable and it invites them to share a different kind of relationship and future than is on offer by the sense of either fear or protection in response to the actions of the administration. And, it is consistent with the work that many organizations and other efforts are already doing.

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<sup>N</sup> By contrast to cluster flockers, geese do create V-shaped formations, which help reduce wind resistance, provide coordination, share leadership, and provide periods of relative rest. These, and other linear flockers offer a helpful, but different, model, perhaps useful for meeting certain circumstances.



*Meeting these crises with care and tools that express the democracy we mean to build, allows us to build upon our power, rather than spend it down.*

Preparing for crises should include creating plug-and-play policies, opportunities for community members to turn up for each other, and pathways to participate in making decisions about our future together. Crisis moments bring even polarized jurisdictions together in community and call for immediate and significant interventions. As Alex Hertel-Fernandez argues, we can design those interventions in advance with policy

feedback loops in mind and, “yield policies that are more likely to be effective, to endure over time, to open up further possibilities for progressive policymaking in the future, and to build political power and voice for historically marginalized communities,” even where political offices are in the hands of anti-democracy forces.<sup>33</sup>

To be ready, we need to consistently reassess the possible crises and conditions, including those that were unimaginable before. We need to prepare ourselves, our communities, and our capacities to provide for the immediate needs while also inviting one another to a long-term practice of taking care of each other. Crises provide the context for providing care to new people and inviting them to experience and adopt a worldview of mutuality and care. And, meeting these crises with care and tools that express the democracy we mean to build, allows us to build upon our power, rather than spend it down.

## Compression points

In addition to being ready to respond to the threats and crises, we need to create compression points that we choose and build toward. These moments to share the contours of the robust and reparative democracy we are building also provide us opportunities to both test and increase our organizing and mobilizing strength, our political power, and the ideological salience of mutuality and care. And, though we will still be in the crisis, we will create a moment for our coalition to show its affirmative alignment — to assert what we are for, not only what we are against.

## Organizing and mobilizing.

Fundamentally, organizing is democracy enacted, “facilitating people to take action in collective struggle,” according to our Strengthening Organizing project.<sup>34</sup> It bridges beyond personal networks, to build powerful bases of people across differences around shared interests. In creating member-led and -accountable structures, organizing counters the concentration of power and resources. Complementarily, mobilization activates members of basebuilding organizations, as well as people in our communities but not in our organizations.

With the many opportunities for mobilizing against anti-democracy developments, testing the organizing and mobilizing reach of our affirmative coalition can provide a clarifying snapshot of how activated people are by the goals and engagements we are offering. Organizations and other formations will have their campaigns and other actions that will ladder members' and participants' engagement. But our mile-marker moments can provide a test for our flocking.

## Political Power.

Often we measure political power by success, near-success, or failure of particular policies and of elected officials who will support those policies or are committed to shared values or ideology. A critical, complementary metric of political power in the context of nondemocracy may be the ability to slow down or stop the initiatives that are hostile to the people at large.<sup>35</sup>

## Ideological salience.

Ultimately, this is the terrain of the long work. "A governing, economic, and cultural future founded in mutuality and care, even when we are in conflict" is at least a draft description of the world I'm suggesting we are building. (It is by no means a draft message about that world!) Moving more people toward an ideology — a set of beliefs and principles they use to assess policies, news, entertainment, and experiences — of a radical and robust democracy is crucial to creating that future. Right now, there is a consolidation of power in the hands of anti-democracy forces. For them, it's not a popularity contest, but a power contest.<sup>o</sup> But, we do not need to give them the power to limit people's imagination that we matter, that we deserve to receive and are responsible to provide fulsome care, that we are entitled to share in the decision-making that sets the course for our shared future.

*Our mile-marker moments can provide a test for our flocking.*

## Moments to measure.

As we clarify and set our metrics and goals, I suggest that shared compression points or mile markers will provide opportunities for the entire flock to mark how much we have progressed toward our generational goals. Each of these mile markers are opportunities to make the case for an expansive and radically inclusive definition of what it means to be

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<sup>o</sup> Taking presidential returns as an imperfect indicator (as some Trump voters would not support authoritarianism in principle), Trump won with a shade less than 50% of the vote with almost 77 million votes, while more than 88 million eligible voters did not vote for president. (Sources: Domenico Montanaro, "[Trump falls just below 50% in popular vote, but gets more than in past elections](#)," National Public Radio, December 3, 2024 and Michael McDonald, "[2024 General Election Turnout](#)," University of Florida Election Lab, (accessed December 8, 2024).)

American, who counts, and what our rights and responsibilities to one another are. Furthermore, each of these mile markers already has some organizations and coalitions focused on them. However, the long-arc scaffolding for creating a robust and reparative democracy provides opportunities for creative links across them and opportunities to join efforts that might otherwise be separated from each other. Lastly, I'm offering these mile markers as opportunities to issue an affirmative invitation as one way of responding to the crises and attacks we will continue to face.

I offer here a few possible mile markers for consideration. What others might there be?

- **Elections.** Even in the worst of likely scenarios, elections will be important compression points not only because the electoral outcomes may set some of the conditions we will face, but because, as [Erica Chenoweth and Zoe Marks describe](#), "Despite institutional rigging, elections remain crucial focal points for mobilizing robust collective action in electoral autocracies."<sup>36</sup>
- **250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the United States** (July 2026). The story of who the US has been, what an American is, and who we will be together will be front and center in the year-long celebration of the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. The administration has already conveyed the picture of America and Americanness that it will promote through its activities. Our pro-democracy alliance has must contest. And, after a year and a half of responding, demonstrating our dissent, and protesting the anti-democracy moves we will be facing, this is an opportunity to party for a more robust and reparative democracy.
- **General Strike** (May 2028). The United Auto Workers' president Shawn Fain has called for a general strike on May 1, 2028.<sup>37</sup> As Stephanie Luce has articulated, "Plan 2028 isn't just another general strike call — it's a strategic, long-term push to unite labor and social movements in a coordinated fight against rising authoritarianism."<sup>38</sup> Building on this call, the general strike can be expansive about the robust economic democracy we deserve, where tenants, students, patients, debtors, taxpayers, and others come together with workers to demonstrate the future we are building.
- **Census** (Winter/Spring 2030). The Constitution requires a census every 10 years to determine how much representation and how many resources states and districts get. One need only consider the foundational three-fifths compromise to understand how the enumeration of residents reflects deep values about who counts as American. It seems safe to assume that

the current administration will try to break the ability of the Census to be accurate and complete. But this is an opportunity to create a proactive plan to assert who counts and to make 2030 a moment for a much higher stakes referendum on who we are together.

These may or may not be the right compression points.<sup>P</sup> I offer them to spark cross-movement discussion of opportunities for us to come together to demonstrate, test, and build our power. One advantage of laying out some mile markers now is that different organizations and formations can focus on the most appropriate mile markers for them and still plan to support one another as we approach a particular marker.

## Imagining new forms to meet new challenges

Strategic futuring can be used to test what we are doing or planning against vivid images of plausible futures. But, as in this hypothesis, another important purpose is to test our formations and ways of doing against those future conditions. Too often, we meet today with the forms that were useful yesterday, and we allow ourselves little (if any) room for identifying the forms we need for tomorrow. Futuring offers us a laboratory to identify which of our forms will serve our purposes, which we need to repurpose, and which we need to shed. It also allows us the opportunity to identify where we have gaps in need of filling.

Flocking allows us to leverage our organizational strengths, try new kinds of formations, and share learning and progress across efforts. It relies on each of us to play our roles — whether that is focused at a particular time horizon, on an issue, or in a particular discipline — while maintaining communication and swarming when needed. And, it encourages improving on what works and learning from what does not, while moving toward our goal.

The fiery urgency of the crisis moment undercuts our space to future, systemically depriving us of a vital resource we need to create the just and joyful world we deserve. I have offered a hypothesis of how we might apply the process of futuring to the present moment. Now, I hope that you will be in touch ([crazza@futurecurrents.org](mailto:crazza@futurecurrents.org)) with your reactions, insights, and thoughts.

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<sup>P</sup> Other possibilities include the World Cup, which Mexico, Canada, and the US are cohosting in 2026, and the Olympics, which LA is hosting in the summer of 2028.

# Future Currents

## About us

Future Currents creates the spaces for movement organizations to build resilient relationships, tackle pressing challenges, prepare for possible conditions, and map our way to the future we deserve. We focus on the knotty, chronic, systemic, and often scary obstacles in our daily lives, whether they are authoritarian threats to our democracy, the shifting economic paradigm, or the need within movements to retool and reshape our infrastructure to meet changing conditions.

Future Currents encourages movement leaders and organizations to operate outside the dominant modes of thinking that currently limit the scope of possibility. We use a mix of creative methods — including facilitated immersive group convenings, scenario planning exercises, and resources that build the muscles of preparation and imagination — to spark new understandings, analyses, and strategies that open up the potential for long-term change.

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## About the Author

**Connie M. Razza** is the Executive Director of Future Currents, a movement utility that provides progressive leaders space to plan along a longer time horizon that they otherwise are able to, to prepare to meet conditions beyond our control, and to practice responding to crisis and opportunity across organizational lines. Before joining Future Currents, Connie built the strategic research department and served as chief of campaigns at the Center for Popular Democracy. She also served as the vice president of policy & research at Demos, a senior policy analyst for health issues at the New York City Council, and a union organizer and strategic research campaigner. She currently sits on the boards of the Action Network Fund, the Economic Policy Institute Policy Center, and the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy.



# Endnotes

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- <sup>4</sup> Matt Stevens and Jason M. Bailey, "[Bob Woodward's New Book Will Detail 'Harrowing Life' Inside Trump White House](#)," New York Times, July 30, 2018, (accessed April 17, 2025).
- <sup>5</sup> "[Former Pres. Trump: 'I Am Your Justice...I Am Your Retribution'](#)," C-SPAN, March 4, 2023, (accessed April 17, 2025).
- <sup>6</sup> Ruha Benjamin, *Imagination: A Manifesto* (2024), p 16
- <sup>7</sup> From Benjamin Franklin, "Advice to a Young Tradesman," in George Fisher, ed., *The American Instructor: or Young Man's Best Companion* (1748) (according to [Wikipedia](#)).
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- <sup>9</sup> John Berger, "Wanting Now" (April 2006), [Hold Everything Dear: Dispatches on Survival and Resistance](#), Pantheon Books.
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- <sup>14</sup> Connie Razza and Angela Peoples, "[Reframing the Prevailing American Narrative for 2052](#)," Social & Economic Justice Leaders Project, 2022: 4.
- <sup>15</sup> Jason Stanley, *Erasing History: How Fascists Rewrite the Past to Control the Future*, New York: One Signal Publishers, 2024: xi-xii.
- <sup>16</sup> Bubbling Over can be viewed on YouTube in its entirety, though my initial exposure to [the song](#) was in Marlon Riggs, [Ethnic Notions](#), California Newsreel (distributor), 1987.
- <sup>17</sup> Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2020: 81.
- <sup>18</sup> Stanley, 25.
- <sup>19</sup> Consider George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, University of Chicago Press, 1980 (16).
- <sup>20</sup> Ella Fitzgerald with Duke Ellington and his orchestra (performance), "[Drop Me Off In Harlem](#)," (Sony/ATV Music Publishing), 1933 (originally).
- <sup>21</sup> Sakena Abedin, in conversation, June 23, 2024.
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<sup>22</sup> Robinson, 33, citing to J.L. Hammond, "The Industrial Revolution and Discontent" in *Economic History Review* (1930) and E.J. Hobsbawn, "The Machine Breakers in Labouring Men (1964).

<sup>23</sup> "Future," [etymology.com](https://www.etymology.com).

<sup>24</sup> John Jennings, "We are the stars: Black speculative narratives and the history of the future," *Afrofuturism: A History of Black Futures*, Washington, DC: National Museum of African American History & Culture/Smithsonian Books, 2023: 73.

<sup>25</sup> Cleveland Clinic, "[Why Do We Dream? Experts are Still Trying to Unravel This Mystery](#)," Health Essentials (webpage), (accessed August 5, 2023).

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<sup>28</sup> Amy Carroll and Connie Razza, "[Dispatches from Possible Futures: Interim Report --- Horizons Project](#)," Social & Economic Justice Leaders Project (June 2023).

<sup>29</sup> Brené Brown, *Atlas of the Heart* (Random House: 2021), 101.

<sup>30</sup> See for instance, Mark de la Iglesia, "[Democracy in the United States: What We'll Be Watching in 2025](#)," *Freedom House*, October 31, 2024.

<sup>31</sup> Peter Friederici, "[How a Flock of Birds Can Fly and Move Together](#)," *Audubon* (March-April 2009).

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<sup>33</sup> Alex Hertel Fernandez, "[How Policymakers Can Craft Measures That Endure and Build Political Power](#)," *Roosevelt Institute* (June 2020), 4.

<sup>34</sup> Strengthening Organizing Project, "[Fighting Shape: An Assessment of US Organizing](#) (an interim report)," *Future Currents* (February 2024), 13. The Strengthening Organizing Project Core Team comprises Travon Anderson, Deborah Axt (former), Daniel Martinez HoSang, Cristina Jiménez, Zoe Lee-Park (former), Sophia Lindner, Kandace Montgomery, Connie Razza, Lissy Romanow, Nsé Ufot, and Crystal Zermeno.

<sup>35</sup> Erica Chenoweth, in conversation, January 10, 2025.

<sup>36</sup> Erica Chenoweth and Zoe Marks, "[Pro-democracy Organizing against Autocracy in the United States: A Strategic Assessment & Recommendations](#)," (October 2022): 4.

<sup>37</sup> See for example, Michael Sainato, "['We want everyone walking out': UAW chief outlines mass strike for May 2028](#)," *The Guardian*, 22 Jan 2024.

<sup>38</sup> Stephanie Luce, "[Plan 2028: Bringing Labor and Social Movements Together](#)," *The Forge*, March 14, 2025.