

# Image[inaries]

Visions of desirable futures



*What world would you want to live in?*

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# Imagining the world anew

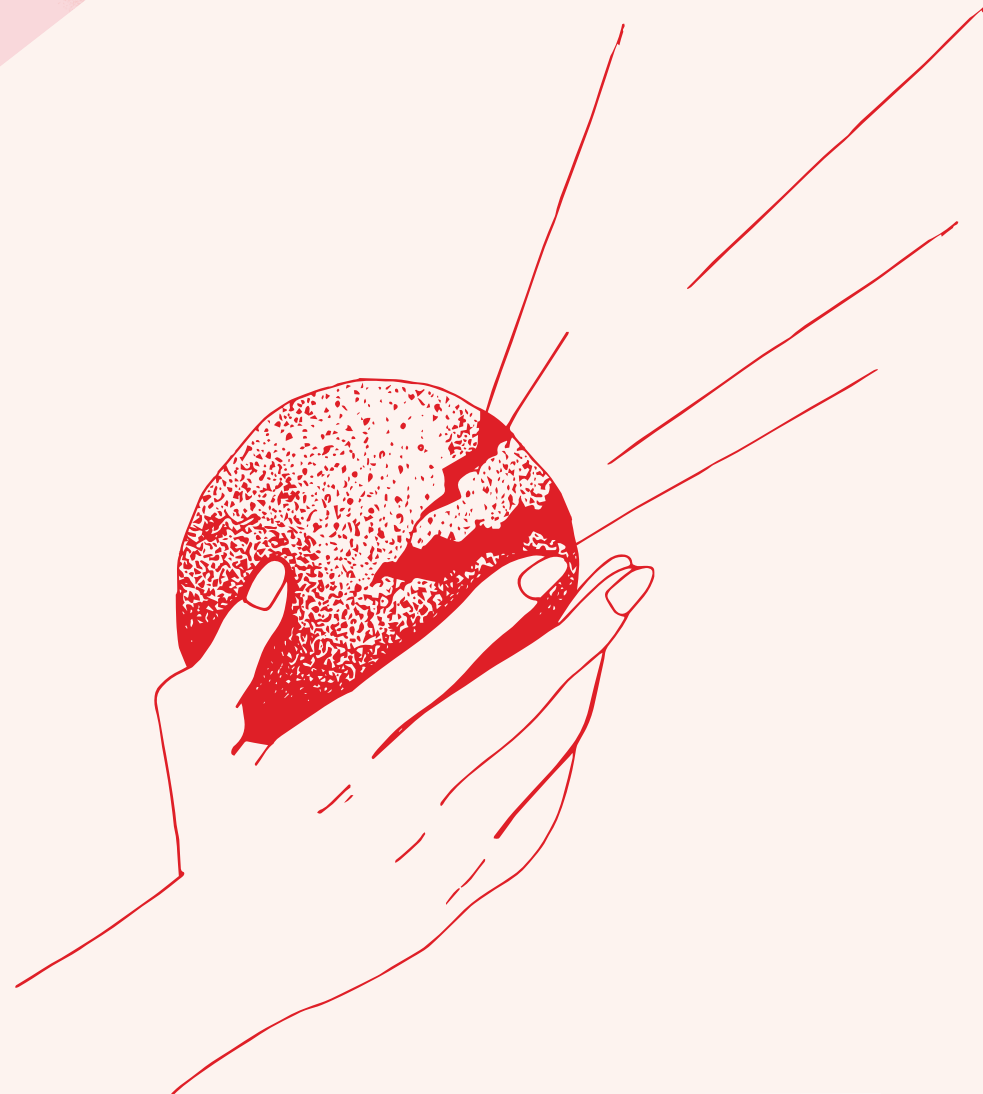
*"Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next."*

- Arundhati Roy

We're living in challenging times. Disruptions to "normal" occur one after another. Arundhati Roy and others have described our current age as a transitory phase, from one historical era to the next, a time between worlds.

Such uncertainties also provide an opportunity. Consider for a moment: what's a future that you would want to live in? How plausible is that future? And how might we bring the allure of desirable futures into the present?

We went looking for how people are engaging with these types of questions. We dove into the futures literature and met people who are imagining this world anew. This is our record of findings and discussions in the fall of 2021.



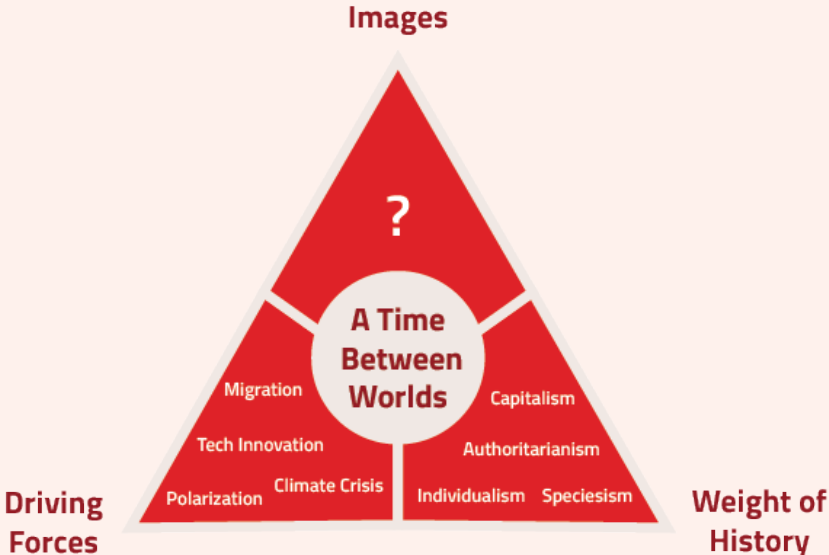
# Images

*“Social change will be viewed as a push-pull process in which a Society is at once pulled forward by its own magnetic images of an idealized future and pushed from behind by its realized past.”  
— Fred Polak*

In futures studies, a vision of the future is called an “image.” Following futurist writings, we use the term image to variously mean a vision, a shared social myth or imaginary, and a way of understanding one’s part in the cosmos of time and space.

Writing in the 1950s, Fred Polak also felt he was living through the end of an era, “a literal breach in time.” He described the image as a conceptual tool for imagining and creating desirable futures, and he postulated that societies rise and fall based on their images.

Another futures scholar, Sohail Inayatullah, has used the push-pull process described by Polak as two corners of a “futures triangle,” with a third corner called “the weight of history.” In this model, these three forces exert three types of influences on us. While the tides of history push us along, and the weights of history hold us down, desirable images appeal with their magnetism, drawing us into the future.



# The weight of history

*"Capitalism, as a social-economic system, is necessarily committed to racism and sexism."*  
- Silvia Federici

Numerous people have declared the climate crisis as a crisis of capitalism. When we see headlines like "Capitalism Can't Fix the Climate Crisis," we are reminded that the problems of modernity are linked.

How deeply entangled are the -isms of the past? Are racism, sexism, genderism, and speciesism all woven of the same ideological net?

This weaving helps explain why change is so hard. Our own entanglements often prevent us from imagining and creating futures that don't reproduce the -isms of the past.

This could also be viewed as an opportunity: if "problems" are entangled, how about "solutions"? Does working in one area require work in others? And could there be a reverse domino effect, wherein success in one area has a favorable influence on others?



# Positioning ourselves in time

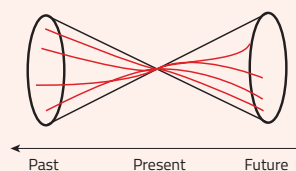
*"No single idea has been more important than, perhaps as important as, the idea of progress in Western civilization."*

— Robert Nisbet

The endless frontier. The American Dream. A global village. The arc of the moral universe, bending toward justice. These are all social imaginaries: images of the future. What they have in common is that they are all progressive images: prophecies and promises of something better, an advance that's still to come.

Progressive histories can be alluring. But what if the progressive imaginary is itself part and parcel of the ideologies of the past? Our scanning suggested that a defining feature of progressive, growth-centered imaginaries is eventual collapse. Should progressivism be considered another entanglement, another weight of history that must be cast off before we can imagine the world anew?

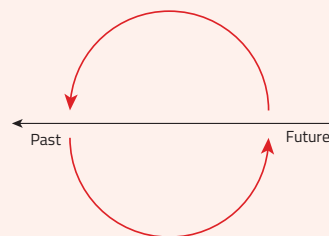
In recent decades, numerous people have come to see time in new-old ways — ways that challenge progressive assumptions.



Emergent views of time are one alternative: history as a group of trajectories, shaped like a cone, in which the present branches into possible futures.

Ilya Prigogine described such divergent trajectories in physical and chemical processes. Riane Eisler traced human past and futures as the interplay of two basic organizational forms: dominator and partnership models of society.

*How might potential futures change our views of the past?*



Cyclical views of time are another alternative: history that is understood experientially, by analogy to biological, ecological, and planetary rhythms.

Tyson Yunkaporta wrote of his great-grandmother as also his niece, an ongoing cycle of generations. Rasheedah Phillips imagined combining Western linear time with experiential time: "Such a time construct inevitably requires a new language. It requires a way to speak of the past, present, and future without hierarchies."

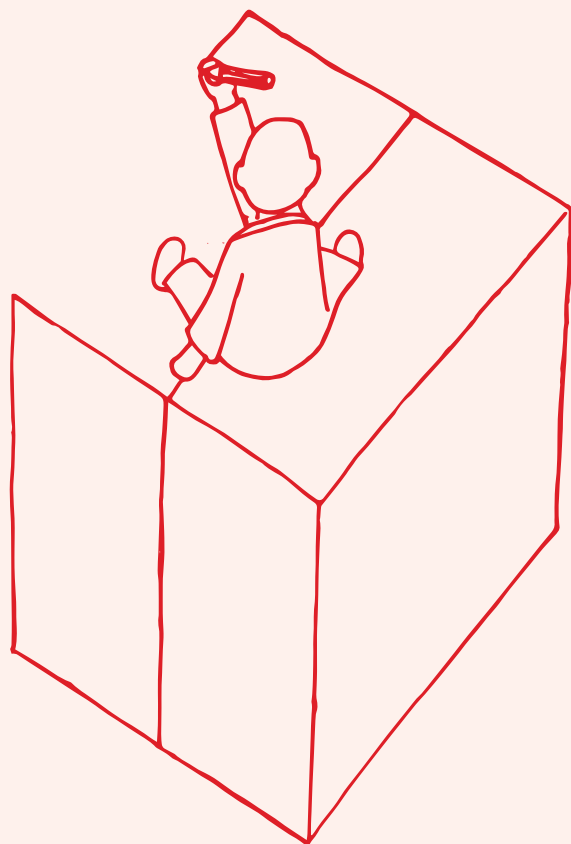
*What futures would our ancestors want to live in?*



# Imagining the unimaginaire

*"Every time we try to think outside the box, we're probably reproducing the box in a different way."*

— Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti



If you could walk through that portal into a world anew, how would you describe the social imaginaries that you found there? What criteria might one use in identifying images for a new era?

Writing on these questions in the 1970s, Oliver Markley and Willis Harman listed "characteristics of an adequate image of humankind." Images should: convey a holistic understanding of life, entail an ecological ethic, entail a self-realization ethic, accommodate various culture and personality types, balance and coordinate satisfactions, and be experimental and evolutionary.

We've collected criteria that are similar to those listed by Markley and Harman, and we've discussed others that are different. Because of our concerns about reproducing "the box" of past ideologies, we sought images that are non-progressive. We gravitated toward images that help us in embracing uncertainties. We looked for images of a world in which many worlds fit. And we scouted for images that express a unity of being and knowing.

These are the types of criteria we used.

## A magnetic image...

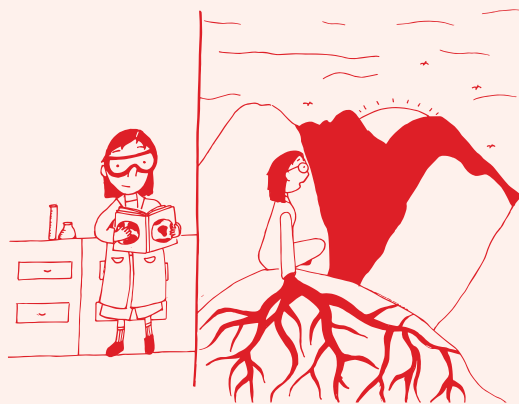
- Presents an alternative view of time (emergent and/or cyclical) rather than progressive
- Is holistic and ecological - it defies separation between humans and the land or between humans and nature
- Accommodates uncertainty
- Illustrates a world in which many worlds fit
- Promotes unity of being and knowing
- Is transcontextual and multidimensional - rather than focusing on only one dimension, such as economic

# The pull toward the preferable

*"The only lasting truth is change."  
— Octavia Butler (Earthseed)*

Octavia Butler's lasting truth is an example of an image that meets the above criteria. It's a vision that conveys a holistic, evolutionary understanding, and it helps us to embrace uncertainties without the prophecies of a progressive historical narrative.

In scanning for and clustering such images, one of the ways we organized them was according to first- and second-order stances: images that reflect a sense of knowing about the world and images that reflect being in the world.



The cosmologies of systems scientists often convey a stance of knowing about the world. Quotes that point to potential future(s) images include:

- "The universe is a living, creative, experimenting experience of discovering what's possible at all levels of scale, from microbe to cosmos." (Margaret Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers)
- "On earth the environment has been made and monitored by life as much as life has been made and influenced by the environment." (Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan)
- "Life creates conditions conducive to life." (Janine Benyus)

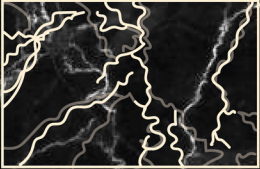
The images of indigenous peoples often evoke an experiential stance. They reflect a more grounded position of being in the world. Quotes that point to potential future(s) images include:

- "Life in any environment is viable only when humans view the life surrounding them as kin. The kin, or relatives, include all the natural elements of an ecosystem." (Enrique Salmón)
- "It's about interdependence, and it's about understanding the nature of interdependence and being able to find ways to resonate with that interdependence in ways that allow for human life and also the life of nature to continue ... from the micro, to the macro, to the cosmic." (Gregory Cajete)
- "Our truth ... in a majority of Indigenous societies, conceives that we (humans) are made from the land; our flesh is literally an extension of soil." (Vanessa Watts)

Then again, these two clusters might be better seen as complementary, parts of a larger whole. We think of the nascent images on this page as provocations, examples to stimulate our imaginations and draw us into a new era.



We experimented with provocations, here in the form of questions, then formatted them into posters to be shared. The following are three variations.



# IS THE FUTURE A TIME, A PLACE OR BOTH?

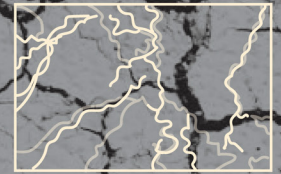
With these questions, we're exploring relationships.  
What are your questions?  
What types of relationships shape a future you would want to live in?



# HOW MIGHT I METABOLIZE AND BE METABOLIZED?

With these questions, we're exploring relationships. What are your questions? What types of relationships shape a future you would want to live in?

\* Inspired by the de-centering of the Decolonial Futures Collective, Dear Climate and others.

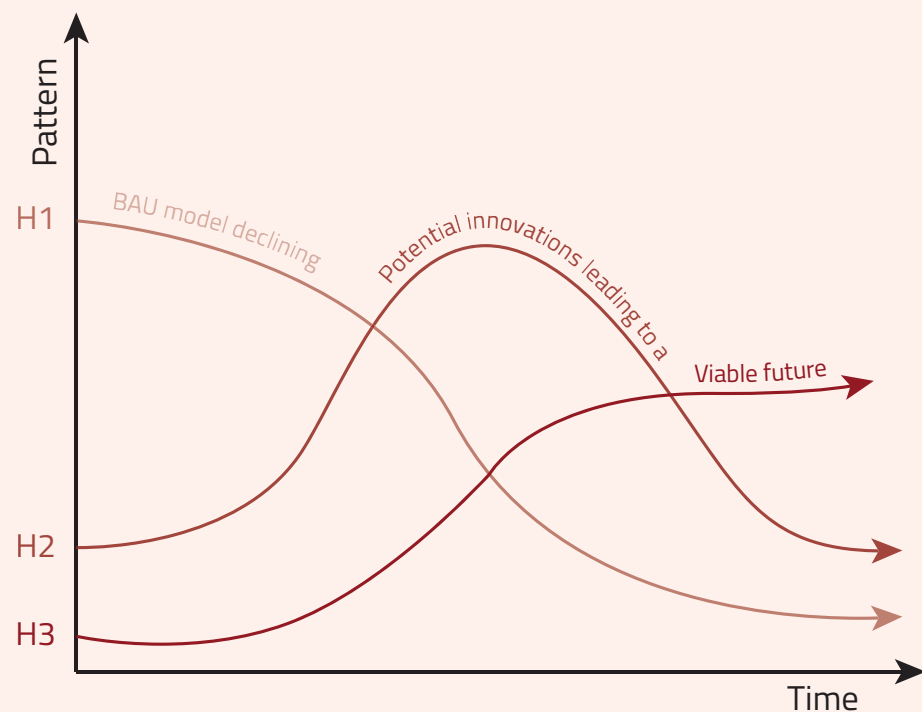


# HOW SHALL I BE FOR YOU TO BE FREE?

With these questions, we're exploring relationships. What are your questions? What types of relationships shape a future you would want to live in?

\* Adapted from Orland Bishop's description of the Zulu greeting Sawubona

# From here to there



Adapted from H3Uni

*"We want to get 'there' – whether 'there' is a beautiful techno-utopic world, or a more just arrangement that works for the many and not just the few. But there is no 'there'; there is only a yearning, an aching, a struggle for 'there' – and in the struggle, we change."*

— Bayo Akomolafe

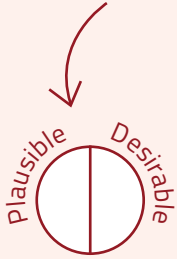
One futures method for thinking about how we might get from "here to there" is called Three Horizons. "Here" is the current world, business as usual (BAU). That's Horizon One. "There" is the world through the portal, your imagined future, described by your preferred images. That's Horizon Three. The question is: what types of scenarios might take us from Horizon One to Horizon Three? These scenarios comprise Horizon Two.

For each scenario vignette on the next pages, consider two questions. How plausible is it? And how desirable is it?

"Desirable" means that this scenario doesn't reproduce the past (H1), but instead points the way toward a new world, a world in which you would want to live (H3). Then, after reading these scenario vignettes, consider how you would write your own scenarios. In that writing, perhaps you will feel the yearning and aching that Bayo Akomolafe describes above.

Fill in how plausible and desirable each future scenario is to you.

# Futures scenarios



GDP is abandoned as a measure of national prosperity. Countries experiment with various types of basic income guarantees and alternative ways to measure wellbeing and productivity without centering economic growth.



A national service program is implemented across the United States. All 18 year olds are required to spend a year engaging in community activities to grow the care economy, build regional resilience, and mitigate climate impacts.



Starting in cities, land and housing has been successfully de-commodified. Property deeds are converted into cooperative titles equally owned by all residents city-wide. Everyone becomes a renter and share prices are measured against per-housing-foot cooperative shares. Cooperative shares cannot be gifted nor transferred upon death.



The social media giants of the past haven't survived the transition to a democratized internet. Everyone has migrated to distributed platforms, where we can connect and coordinate with others in advertising-free and data-protected environments and marketplaces.



With the re-localization of much food and electricity production and distribution, open currencies are sufficient for most daily transactions. Individuals belong to a variety of place-based currency networks, each specializing in particular needs and services.



The process of repatriating native lands has finally broken headway in the United States. Treaty rights have been reinstated, cultural artifact repatriations are underway, and federal as well as local governments have partnered with tribal nations to commit to these transitions.



Amidst ongoing global food supply chain and health related problems, people are developing more personal relationships with food. Individual households are growing their own food and joining labor brigades to nearby farms. Community food safety nets are expanded to support more people who lack food security.



Inter-species relationship and interdependence is foundational to educational curriculum. De-centering the human in the diverse ecosystem of living creatures on earth has led to all sorts of societal shifts. Wildlife corridors begin to flow through human areas — cities, towns, and suburbs — which are gradually re-patterned to reflect the needs of many species.



North American and European countries initiate joint reparations for the unpaid labor costs of chattel slavery. A Department of Reparations is created in the United States to manage the allocation of trillions of dollars in community investments, individual education scholarships and cash grants.



Pharmaceutical companies have transitioned to public ownership. Free from profit constraints, these companies can be evaluated on their contributions to public health, scientific advancement, and local economic resiliency.

# Where do I stand?

*"As soon as man's (sic) eyes are opened to the flow of time toward the future, which probably will be different from both present and past, two insoluble enigmas are posed: the problem of change and the problem of meaning."  
— Fred Polak*

Writing in the 1950s of a "literal breach in time," Fred Polak considered images along two philosophical dimensions: essence and influence. Futures scholars Elise Boulding, Keri Facer, Peter Hayward, Stuart Candy and others have interpreted Polak's words in various ways, and Hayward turned these two dimensions into a workshop exercise: the Polak Game.

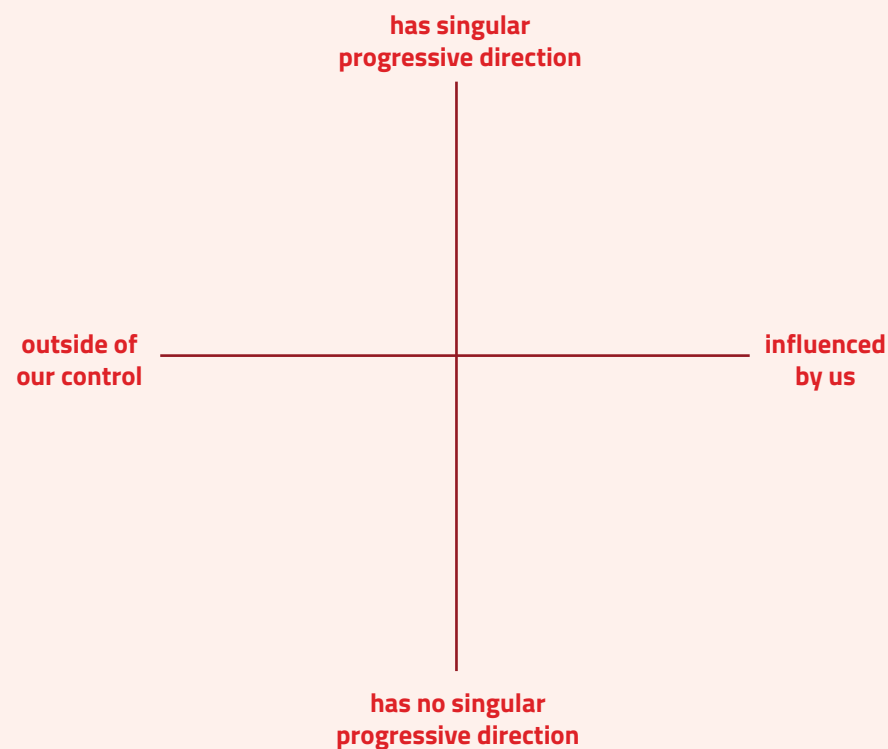
Consider this exercise as both a game and a meta-game. As a game, the person hosting the workshop asks two questions, and the workshop participants move forward and backward along two axes or dimensions, physically enacting a 2x2 matrix. Then everyone gathers to discuss where they ended up on the matrix, what that means for their views of the future, and where on the matrix various shifts in perspective might take them. As a meta-game, the question is: what are the questions one would use to facilitate this exercise? After all, Polak's words are open to interpretation. Moverover, our understandings of time and of positioning ourselves in time have evolved since the 1950s.

With this preface in mind, here is an example of one way to host the Polak Game.

The game facilitator might say: I will ask you all a question, and in response you will either move forward or backward. The question is, **"Does human history have a progressive direction?"** The number of steps forward you take represents the degree to which you think the future is progressing in a singular direction. The number of steps back represents the degree to which you think it is not.

The second question is, **"Do you think people have influence over the future world we live in?"** If you believe that we have agency and influence, take steps to the right in the amount of influence you believe that we have. If you think that we do not have influence over the future, take steps to the left.

How do you feel about the quadrant you are in? Would you change anything about where you stand?



# Endnotes & acknowledgements

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