



Article

“Lots of Extra Time and Privilege to Just Dream of Utopia”: Barriers to Long-Term Visioning in Racial Justice Work

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Abstract

This article presents findings from fourteen qualitative interviews with racial justice advocates in the United States, offering insights into the obstacles that prevent them from deeper engagement with long-term future visions. The results indicate that despite advocates' deep connection to the past, present, and future, there are high barriers to leveraging long-term visions. Three struggles are apparent: (1) The demand for long-term visions is usurped by short-term need, (2) Because the demand for long-term perspectives is not prioritized, diverting any resources to make it happen feels unjustified, and (3) In the space of racial justice, battles against white supremacy are constant and exhausting, reducing the capacity for dreaming. We offer some possibilities for what both futurists and advocates could do to enable more visions of racially just futures.

Keywords

Antiracism, Decolonizing Futures, Hopeful Futures, Interviews, Social Justice

Introduction

“Without a democratising of future imaginaries, we run the risk of remaining forever ensconced in other people’s dreams.” (Chattaraj, 2019, n.p.)

Principles of what makes a more equitable world are held in the hearts and minds of people working toward change. To understand how those working toward racial equity think about long-term visions of equitable worlds in their work, we conducted an initial investigation using interviews with fourteen people. We found, in the urgent work of fighting against racially oppressive systems, funding sources rarely reward long-term perspectives. Because of a range of pressures toward the short-term, many of the research participants in this study— people who identify as advocating for racial justice— were uncertain that they could make time for long-term visioning processes. Processes that they say feel “Pollyanna” and more often used by “people with lots of extra time and privilege who can just dream of utopia.” Therefore, their visions of better future possibilities remain unwritten.

Future visions in racial justice contexts may be particularly interesting to futures studies because this type of advocacy tends to heighten awareness of social systems, particularly how institutional systems in the past and present are structured to give some people more resources and power than others, and therefore limit what futures are possible. And futures studies may be useful to the work of racial justice because it increases creative capacities to imagine a range of possible outcomes of social change. This aligned learning is why we encourage greater engagement between these two worldbuilding orientations. However, our fourteen interviews revealed that these racial justice advocates rarely use tools or processes for developing future visions in their work. This is an important opportunity for mutual learning because as the world population migrates and shifts more quickly without attention to repairing injustice, proposing visions of racial equity and thriving integration is crucial.

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As design scholars who engage with participatory futures and are active in racial justice activism inside and outside the academy, we see an opportunity for new perspectives between justice advocates and futures practitioners. This article describes our findings from interviews with racial justice advocates in the United States to understand how they engage with long-term future visions. We sought people who self-identified as ‘advocates,’ a term deliberately chosen to encompass a wider range of people than those who might identify as ‘activists.’ The interviews delved into their current understanding of ‘long-term visions,’ how they think about past, present, and future in their current work, and what they see as useful and challenging about working with long-term ideas.

This ongoing research project seeks to connect racial justice advocates to tools and approaches that make use of long-term future visions to support their missions. These are the voices that are often left out of future-shaping strategies, though they are expert in change-making. The persuasive value of long-term visioning, which feels like a luxury only available for others, is powerful in the work of fighting for equity. What does it mean for the future, if long-term visioning really is a luxury that cannot be made available to people who commit themselves to justice work? If the people working on the ground to make change are not supported to generate and share their visions of better worlds, who is shaping our ideas of what the future can hold?

Bridging Racial Justice and Futures Practice

Racial justice advocates hold an enriched understanding of the historic and systemic causes of racial oppression. Most organizing strategies and racial equity training begin with an education in structural oppression: tying present pain and future possibilities to a history of purposeful, systemic exclusion in the past. This reparative structural perspective is crucial to racial justice advocacy. Rather than focusing on individual behaviors which is one of the dominant majority’s tools for downplaying the causes of racial disparity, advocates develop an understanding of systemic privilege and structural exclusion (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Brown, 2011). A common framework used to quickly define and broaden the levels of oppression that occur is known as ‘The Four I’s of Oppression,’ (Bell, 2013) illustrated here in Fig. 1.

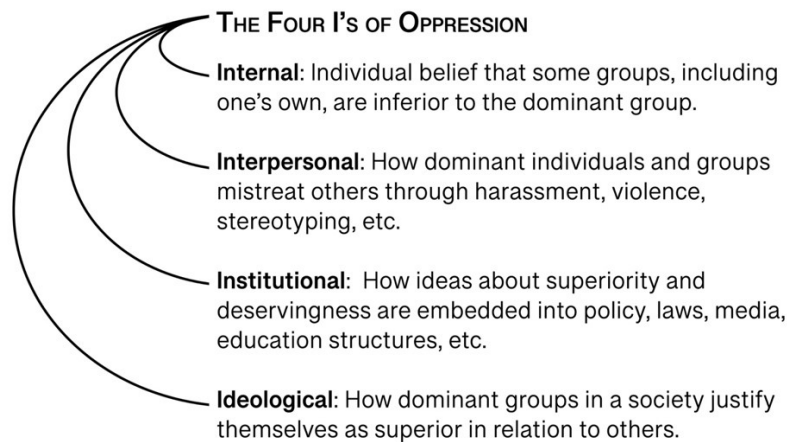


Fig. 1: We have illustrated a framework often referenced in racial justice contexts, ‘The Four I’s of Oppression.’

Advocates understand that racial oppression can do harm when it is internalized, interpersonal, institutional, and ideological. Racial consciousness requires an understanding of racism that goes beyond the overt, individual, interpersonal bigotry of the KKK, which is not the primary way that oppression harms society (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). In analyzing the education of new antiracist advocates, sociologist Amanda Ball describes the “development of the requisite racial consciousness and rejection of normative colorblindness that anti-racism requires” (Ball, 2022, p. 2). While some people would like to think of racism as only in the past, “the consequences of racial social

stratification can still be seen in many spheres of life, including education, employment, housing, health care, and the political and legal systems” (Szymanski, 2012, p. 434). Recognizing multiple levels of oppression sets racial justice advocates apart from a standard American education. Engaging and naming concepts of structural and systemic oppression is essential to racial consciousness.

Futures studies has long pursued community-based tools for imagining preferred futures (Boulding, 1988; Dator, 1993; Hutchinson, 1996; Inayatullah, 2008; Milojević, 2013; Pereira et al., 2018; Polak, 1973; Sardar & Sweeney, 2016). Expanding the worldview of futures practice beyond the most privileged and well-accessed began with Eleonora Masini (1982) and Ziauddin Sardar (1993) who warned against prioritizing Western interests and perspectives. It continues as scholars and practitioners engage Afrofuturism, indigenous futures, queer perspectives, structures developed by women in marginalized countries, and many other alternative viewpoints on the present and the future (see, for example: (Ahlqvist & Rhisiart, 2015; Bhavnani & Foran, 2008; Bourgeois et al., 2022; Cruz & Kahn-Parreño, 2022; Fleener & Coble, 2022; Kapoor, 2001; Marez, 2016; Mazé, 2019; Milojević, 2005; Milojević & Inayatullah, 2003; Mitchell & Chaudhury, 2020; Pulido & De Lara, 2018; Sriprakash, 2022; Sriprakash et al., 2020; Whyte, 2017).

Masini, early on, recognized the value of overcoming what she saw then as a disregard for non-male, non-mainstream perspectives. She wrote, “The best listeners, capturers of seeds of change, are those who do not fit the existing social character in its totality. The capturers, the listeners, are those who somehow are outside the logic of that specific system” (Masini, 1982, p. 8). Sardar, in his 1999 collected volume wrote, “The project of the futures discourse is then to persuade the world to move toward pluralistic futures through creative and imaginative analysis and productive action” (Sardar, 1999, p. 2). The prioritization of western worldviews is often invisible unless alternative, plural perspectives and narratives are deliberately engaged.

Approaches to long-term visions that are careful to expand rather than exclude are likely to be more acceptable and relevant to antiracist contexts than those that do not. As Kevin Jae finds, “When evaluating the specific methods used for decolonizing a project, one could keep some general thought in mind: will it disrupt the status quo, or will it reinforce current power relations, and is it a vehicle for dialogue and inclusion? And who benefits?” (Jae, 2023, p. 5). This attention to expanded perspectives can be seen already in the Causal Layered Analysis developed by Sohail Inayatullah (Inayatullah, 1998, 2005, 2008). He explains that this powerful tool for assessment of the context has strength “not in predicting the future but in creating transformative spaces for the creation of alternative futures” (Inayatullah, 1998, p. 815). Taking time to understand the history and cultural mindsets that brought us to the present state helps groups hold a deeper understanding of the current situation, which provides a stronger set of inputs for imagining new futures.

Our concern with bringing futures approaches into racial justice settings is toward those approaches that do not engage critically with issues of oppression, access, and power. As futures researcher Gunnarsson- Östling found, “Futures studies usually make no attempts to reveal underlying assumptions, i.e., often lack a critical and reflexive perspective, which is needed in order to add a critical feminist perspective and envision feminist futures” (Gunnarsson-Östling, 2011, p. 1029). And environmental anthropologist Mariam Abazeri asserts that when proposing alternative futures “gender, sex, and sexuality are not secondary or ancillary to the questions of capitalism, race, class, and coloniality but fundamental elements that constitute them” (Abazeri, 2022, p. 6). To bridge racial justice and long-term visioning, Balcom Raleigh & Heinonen explain that making room for marginalized experiences in shaping the future can lead to “opening humanity’s options instead of closing them, seeing more than ‘official views of the future,’ testing the limits of socio-political imaginaries, and having a realistic sense of which power dynamics and voices are in contest regarding a possible future” (Balcom Raleigh & Heinonen, 2019, p. 145). For futurist approaches to be culturally appropriate in racial justice settings, the approaches must overtly acknowledge that intersectional oppressions and privilege shape the present-day experiences of all people, and work with an expansive understanding of past history and future unfolding.

Interviews about Long-term Visions in Racial Justice Work

Both authors center participant justice in our design research approaches. For this project, we made several moves toward a practice of justice-based research (Asad et al., 2019; Carey, 2020; Dombrowski et al., 2016; Khasnabish

& Haiven, 2012; Light, 2019; Light & Akama, 2012; To et al., 2022) First, interviews were conducted as collaborative conversations, with participants invited into the research question with full knowledge of the study's goals. Second, interviewees could reveal their real names for any quotations they wanted to acknowledge. Therefore, most quotations in this paper remain anonymous, but some are attributed according to the instructions of the individuals (Bruckman et al., 2015). Lastly, we invited participants to give input on the findings as the insights were developed and to participate in a workshop to discuss the findings and experiment with visioning tools. These activities were moments to connect their lived experience with the research findings. This reflects our critical constructivist qualitative research approach (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Levitt, 2021).

The lead author conducted semi-structured interviews with people who responded to a recruiting email: “seeking folks to interview about the way their organization uses visioning in advocacy for racial justice.” Requests for interviews were sent through the author's personal networks as snowball sampling and through direct requests to racial justice-based organizations across the United States, via email and the professional network, LinkedIn. Participants self-identified as qualified to this request and no disqualification criteria were used and were not necessary. Only one participant was removed from the data set for being non-representative. This was based on two attributes: (1) They did not work directly in racial justice, but social justice overall, and (2) They are an expert in futures practices and teach other activists to think about long-term visions. All other participants met the key criteria of (1) Engaged in activities that pursue racial equity, (2) In a position to shape the practices of an organization, and (3) Conduct justice-based work in North America. All participants were located in the United States. Participants were nominally compensated for their participation via electronic payment.

The interviews lasted for one hour and took place via the remote communication software, Zoom. The interview guide included questions such as:

- What is your experience of thinking about long-term visions in your work?
- What does “long-term” mean to you in your work?
- What are some sources of inspiration for this type of thinking?
- Have you thought about what your work would look like when you have truly succeeded? When your work isn't needed anymore?

Interview data were coded in-vivo to preserve each participant's precise terms and descriptions. Verbatim coding helps to minimize bias and prioritize the lived experience of the advocates. In this article, we provide many direct quotations from participants to continue to share the findings in their voices. We followed a critical-constructivist grounded theory approach and halted recruitment when the analysis reached saturation (Levitt, 2021).

Participants

Fourteen racial justice advocate participants (11 female, 3 male) remained in the final data analysis. They come from a variety of backgrounds including geographic diversity, roles, and sectors relevant to racial justice, and a wide range of years of experience working in racial justice advocacy (including five participants with more than 20 years of experience) (Table 1).

The term “racial justice advocate” is used deliberately in both the recruiting and the write-up to encompass all people who consider themselves working toward antiracist outcomes, whether as an activist, a leader in a community-based organization, or someone who advocates for equity within a more traditional organization. “Activism” is technically defined in the sociological literature as encompassing a plethora of activities, from confrontational (strikes, sit-ins) to non-confrontational (letter writing, organizing) to staying informed or making donations (Szymanski, 2012, p. 344). However, in common usage, the term is more strongly associated with confrontational approaches to making change. Instead, recruiting for people who identify as ‘advocates,’ resulted in participants who reflect a variety of roles and sectors: racial equity consultants, academics who study how race and racism shape social practices, executive directors and other leaders within not-for-profit organizations, and activists who organize for an end to unfair housing, incarceration, and white supremacy.

Activism researcher Paul Gorski finds that “racial justice activists are people who identify racial justice activism as their central life passion” (Gorski, 2019, p. 668) and this was true for the advocates in our interviews. Justice-based values show up in many of the ways they orient themselves outside of their advocacy work.

While we may often think of U.S.-based racial justice work primarily being led by Black Americans, the participants reflected a wider racial diversity (Table 1). Several non-Black (i.e., white, Asian and Pacific Islander, Latina, and Southeast Asian) interview participants sometimes mentioned their privilege relative to an understanding of proximity to whiteness (understood to be, “sufficiently distant from Blackness and close to whiteness on the Black-white binary” (Smith, 2012, p. 72). In this way, most described their work as fighting against white supremacy and therefore encompassing more than the anti-Black racism that is sometimes assumed.

Continued dialog with participants

Research engagement did not end with the interview. Participants were provided with a copy of the abstract for this article, the key findings, and a list of the quotes from their interview that might be used in publication. Two weeks later they were invited to attend an online workshop to discuss the findings and learn about futures techniques that help foster long-term visions. This was a powerful method to bring more meaning to our interpretation of the findings as well as aligning with the anti-extractive approaches of scholar activism. Participants made only a few comments in the quotations documents— primarily refining their phrasing or expressing enthusiasm for the research findings. Though one academic participant made very helpful suggestions on the abstract, pointing out that it could be interpreted as expressing a “solutionist” approach toward teaching advocates to use futuring tools. This comment was valuable and indicates a shared understanding of justice-based values. The optional workshop, though attended by only three of the fourteen participants, was a rich point of feedback for the authors. In sharing the key themes, we heard deep resonance and further nuance to how the learnings show up in their work and life beyond the specific advocacy.

Sharing tools for shaping visions was initially conceived as an act of reciprocity: we could offer some next steps to the challenges of employing futures techniques we had identified. It also became an additional point of learning, engaging the participants in conversations about what it might mean to create collective visions. This helped to clarify the distinction between long-term perspectives and long-term outcomes. To share our learnings in the voice of the participants, the following section will present participant quotes alongside insights from our analysis, following practices from sociology for reporting on qualitative interviews.

Table 1: Demographic details of 14 interview participants

Gender identity	Female: 11 Male: 3	Racial identity	AAPI: 3 Black: 4 Latina: 2 SE Asian: 3 White: 2
U.S. location	Northwest: 6 Northeast: 3 Central: 3 Southeast: 2	Time in advocacy	0-5 years: 4 5-10 years: 3 10 - 20 years: 2 20+ years: 5
Roles	Executive Director: 3 In-house leadership: 3 Organizer: 3 Academic: 3 Founder Consultant: 2	Primary sectors	Local community: 3 Housing: 2 Environmental justice: 2 Mobilizing: 2 Design: 1 EdTech: 1 Incarceration: 1 Philanthropy: 1 Urban Planning: 1

Results: Strong Long-term Commitment, But Few Visions of Future Outcomes

Overall, advocates for racial justice are expertly aware of the long-term entrenchment of the challenges they are working to disrupt (e.g., policing, prisons, poverty, housing), and therefore know that long-term strategies must be deployed to make progress. While in any profession, leaders struggle to make time for long-term thinking, in racial justice work in particular, the urgent needs of the present day exert a strong pull toward immediate, incremental improvements. Structurally, practices like grant cycles and government interventions are often set up to support only short-term tactics and incremental measures.

Critical discourses support long time horizons

Advocates are adept at discussing the connection between past, present, and future

Participants spoke fluently and purposefully about the past, present, and future in their work. For example, participant Anna Blackshaw, with more than twenty years of experience in organizing and now coaches other organizers in multiple settings, described how she approaches helping people believe that ‘real transformational shifts’ are possible:

“In order to re-envision where we need to go, we have to understand the ways that our emotions, our bodies, our children, all of those things were weaponized through this colorblind ideology that is actually incredibly dangerous. So, when I vision, the future always includes looking backwards so that we can understand why we're still in the place or how we got here now. So that we can be in right relationship to how we move in the future.”

Another participant, Christine Ortiz, reflected on how her work on helping organizations use design to shape future next steps, asks participants to hold past, present, and future all at once:

“So, we're constantly talking about the importance of historical context. And lived experience in bringing that to bear and using that as important information for the work that folks are doing. And we're asking them to interrogate their present reality and be able to more clearly see what is happening. And we're asking them to design the future. So, I've never really thought of this explicitly, but I think one of the reasons our work can feel really overwhelming to folks is because we ask them to hold all three of those moments in time at the same time. All while everyone feels like there's not enough time to do anything. [laughs] Super.”

Racial consciousness, the common discourse in racial justice advocacy, actively acknowledges how white supremacy has structured the past and continues to shape the plural experiences of the present. This makes racial justice advocates adept at holding long-term perspectives.

Advocates know that it will take generations to overturn historically entrenched inequity

Advocates described working on long-term challenges— changes that will take decades to realize— so they actively engage perspectives and commitment to the future. A leader working to disrupt cycles of incarceration acknowledged,

“It's a long game. Ain't going to happen overnight. My kids aren't going to see it. My grandkids might see it, but we have to start somewhere.”

Participants described how deeply entrenched cycles of oppression such as incarceration, police violence, and affordable housing, need long-term commitments to unseat. A political organizer in Michigan noted,

“20 years have gone by since Clinton passed the crime bill. And it has decimated communities, including

Detroit. And if we start working now, we might be able to help the next generation not be in the emergency response position.”

These advocates have deep emotional connections to making change. However, that commitment to long-term work does not get translated into a vision of what the long-term outcome might look like. And it does not always align with how their funding or project cycles demand immediate, measurable outcomes. They don't feel able to plan for multi-decade strategies. Several mentioned that the recent successes from conservative movements, “Roe versus Wade was a wakeup call,” have demonstrated what very long-term planning can accomplish.

When invited to dream, interviewees easily described better worlds

Toward the end of each interview, the lead author asked each person, “Have you ever thought about what it looks like when your work is ridiculously successful and no longer needed?” Most advocates answered “no.” They mentioned how difficult it is to imagine that:

“I have not let myself think about what would happen at that point, because I don't know that I believe that it's possible in my lifetime.”

Or how it feels better to focus on smaller goals:

“I think the only way to sustain through this kind of work is to appreciate the small moments every day. And not be so focused on this big win which will come tomorrow.”

Nonetheless, several took the prompt as an opportunity to imagine the possible answers.

“Economic security. But not just for white guys, but for everybody. I can imagine that. And it would be a better world.”

And similarly,

“When Black, Brown, Indigenous people have the same opportunities to be successful as white people, so I can go and buy the house the same way that a white person can. I don't have to worry about if someone's not going to want to talk to me or hire me for my job.”

Although they had never imagined radical success, once the question opened up the space, they seemed to enjoy the speculation.

“When you asked ‘what's wildly successful’-- I mean, I think of radically democratizing our access to resources. Radical sustainability in terms of the flows of materials and resources.”

Another offered,

“Everyone would have safe, secure, and stable housing that meets— I guess it would be a world where we don't need to exist anymore. And where housing isn't seen as a commodity, but as a human right.”

Long-term commitment but not specific images

Formal practices for long-term visioning are rare in racial justice contexts.

There is a distinction between making a commitment to long-term work and describing what the end result might look like. Images of the future are rarely used as a strategy in justice practices. Few movements clarify what the result of long-term commitments could be. Only one participant had been formally taught that envisioning success, or thinking through what happens after the change occurs, can be used as a tool of advocacy. Her grad school

professor would remind them to imagine the future:

“It was her challenge to us, she'd say, 'it's awesome that you're critiquing these systems, but what would you design if you could? And if you can't figure that out, how are you going to fight for it?’”

This provocation shifted this participant's perspective on activism. Still, while she was formally taught to think in this way, there were no steps or tools or activities to accompany that orientation to ‘what you would design if you could.’ And in making these ideas about the future active, only two of the participants described projects where they envisioned long-term goals with community partners. These included an art-based activist who often designs community interventions that creatively propose new ways for people to relate to each other, such as an anti-gentrification project where they “*helped them develop a design sprint to imagine 100 years for 100 families for 100 jobs.*” And a leader who works with formerly incarcerated men to help them imagine a world beyond the imprisonment cycles, she says of their projects with the men,

“They can't imagine a society where their five-year-old Black son is not going to be racially profiled. Because that's all they know. They can't imagine that. So, we started to try to provide them a sense of reality, saying, ‘okay, here's what we can put in place. We can set this up. We can expose you and your son to this. We can do this; we can do this.’ And then they start saying, ‘Oh wow, I was just dreaming of this stuff. But this might be able to happen.’”

These two participants demonstrate a strong understanding of the power of imagining futures, but they do not have formal language or processes to structure these approaches.

The conditions of funding and community needs cause short-term thinking to win over long-term dreaming

An executive director explains it simply:

“A lot of the reason why people can't focus on long term planning is that the funding is not there to support it.”

Support structures privilege short-term measures. Leaders described pressures to focus on incremental change like smaller wins rather than battling against deep-seated issues. When justice advocacy work is grant-funded, this makes organizers dependent on requirements that too often measure short-term outcomes.

“Long term visions? I mean, I think in a lot of cases, it's almost a luxury. It's something that if you have the time, the space, the energy to really think about the long term, it can help shape success. Without that time or space, you're left with less direction. And I think about the racial aspects to that a lot. Because we have so many immediate, sudden things that are happening right now. I'm reeling from Buffalo [a mass shooting in a predominantly Black neighborhood supermarket], I don't know anyone in there, but you know, those types of things affect your day to day, and obviously can take a lot of your ability or energy to even get to that point to vision.”

With constant, ongoing violence even short-term plans may be disrupted by urgent, unplanned needs to mobilize or mourn.

Additionally, the people they are serving must trust that you can deliver for them. A political organizer explains the need to prioritize community needs:

“I feel like you ignore one at the peril of the other [long and short term], because if you don't address something short term, if you don't get a short-term win to help people who are suffering now, then you don't have credibility.”

When constituents need solutions right now, and funders are measuring yearly results, the ability to maintain focus on a long-term vision is strained.

Whose role is it to imagine, facilitate, and hold these visions?

Advocates are very attuned to the importance of collaborative and community-generated concepts. A vision of a better future is not theirs alone to create and define, and shy away from taking the lead, unless it is tied to a specific project. Often advocate work to persuade or support other people to make change. But visioning practices are perceived as though an elite group is creating a vision for others to adopt. Claiming an individual vision for a better world, or one leader standing up with a vision for the group, does not fit for people who know that collaboration and systems change are essential for approaching such a complex challenge as racial justice. A consultant who works to bring equity to government processes said,

“We see ourselves as supporting players, not the drivers, so we don't have a vision of us changing the world.”

Some described themselves as not having power and capacity to propose radical change. In this way they feel limited by the expectations of the stakeholders— who most often are not asking for radical social dreams or long-term proposals. So, without permission or a request to imagine utopian worlds, the luxury of social dreaming seems even more out of reach.

White supremacy stifles the capacity for dreaming***It is exhausting to be keenly aware of the complexity of, and blindness to, how systems work to uphold oppression***

This is a group of people who are more knowledgeable than most on how policies and institutions have deliberately upheld oppression, and still do. That view makes them experts on how hard these structures are to change. And being highly attuned to systems of injustice is especially disheartening when others don't see it or want to acknowledge it. As the advocate for breaking cycles of incarceration reminds us,

“We are only scratching the surface of where we need to be in our acknowledgment of the impact of institutional racism. I mean, we're still at the place where we're still in a training phase.”

The colorblindness gap in understanding of how racism is entrenched in our systems means that some people will not understand why disruption is necessary. A mentor in job training reflected on her conversations with young people,

“When I think about long term work, when it comes to racial justice, access is so invisible that people don't even see it. That's how marginalization works. You have no idea what you're being marginalized from in the first place.”

The invisibility of the system matters because it allows a majority of the public to believe that radical change and imagining something new is unnecessary. Anything bolder than incremental change is dismissed as unrealistic, even though disruption from oppressive systems is actually what is needed. An associate professor who works on institutional change described her frustration with

“...the intense insistence on whatever ‘practicality’ or ‘feasibility’ means. It's like, ‘oh, well, no, that's not feasible.’ So, it becomes all about incremental change, which itself isn't bad, but to me it's never been sufficient.”

Deep investment in the current systems ensures that the system fights back by insisting on incremental change that does not disrupt current power structures.

Proposals for change must tread carefully when seeking to shift current power structures

There is risk in seeking to disrupt the status quo, to propose new visions that are not in line with people who hold the most power.

“Many have warned me I shouldn't do it. It's maybe not good for my career. I don't know about that. We'll see.”

Another participant talked about needing to set boundaries for herself,

“So, I think about where I can have the most influence— who I am, how I show up, wherever I am—that is not causing undue harm to me, in the process.”

And even when funders or collaborators know that systems must change, imagination— radical imagination, social dreaming— is rarely the orientation they are comfortable with, trained in, within their expertise. It can be difficult to share a disruptive vision:

“But you have to be very calculated. You have to see that some people may not have the same vision as you. They can't see the horizon like you're able to see it. But if you can sit down and explain to them that there's pain right now, but the pain, if you can endure it, you can survive it. There is a reward at the end.”

Sometimes advocates are willing to take some risks, and other times they need to make decisions that preserve some safety for themselves. It takes skill on the part of the person proposing a change, and openness on the part of the audience, to accept radical visions.

Oppression and violence are ever-present in the context of racism, and this can prevent advocates and communities from having space to dream

There is not a lot of head and heart space left for dreaming of new possibilities when survival is threatened.

“Violence is a part of what you're talking about when you talk about racial justice and long-term planning. The Right are not facing violence when they plan.”

Progressive advocates may be more impacted, emotionally, when these systems are violent to anyone involved, near or far, because they pay close attention to how structures like government and policing uphold oppression. Shootings that targeted vulnerable people were present in our conversations during the Spring of 2022.

“I don't even know. Today's not a great day due to the shooting in [Uvalde] Texas.” And “I'm still reeling from Buffalo, sorry.”

For those in the struggle, imagining a world beyond current violence can seem absurd. Reflecting on the barriers, the professor who studies systems concluded,

“The standards of the current neoliberal academy want to suck up all the air out of your lungs and not leave you anything to form the future with.”

Until advocates are supported enough to have emotional distance from everyday work, it will require herculean efforts to dream of better futures.

Results summary

Advocates are adept at thinking in long spans of time. They know that their work will take generations to implement, and they are capable of dreaming of the future. But they often do not imagine what long-term outcomes will be like because both structural and immediate needs direct them toward shorter-term interventions. The weight of fighting against white supremacy is exhausting and leaves little energy for dreaming of specific futures without support

structures to help them make use of those visions. To reflect further on the results, we employ the Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) (Inayatullah, 1998, 2005) to take a futures studies perspective on the challenge of identifying barriers (Table 2). The CLA is a framework for examining the layers of social structures that shape the present, and in doing so “creat[e] transformative spaces for the creation of alternative futures possibilities” (Inayatullah, 1998, p. 815). We have populated our CLA with themes from the participant interviews, rather than the more typical approach of a collaboratively working through the framework together, as a group.

Table 2: A Causal Layered Analysis of the barriers to visioning from the advocates we spoke with. This was populated by drawing from the research data.

<p>1. Litany (the clearest, everyday signals)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communities want results NOW • Funders want results NOW • Hate crimes are increasing NOW (e.g., Crimes against AAPI have increased 300% in the past year) • Police violence, especially toward Black people, is in the news every day • Violence against protesters increased under President Trump • Grounding oneself in the present is a wellness practice 	<p>2. Social Causes (systems factors)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brutal capitalism drives inequality, leaving little room to ensure all people thrive • Social justice work is rarely well-funded; scarcity for funding necessitates many short-term trade-offs • Funding is typically based on 1,3, or 5-year cycles. Longer-term impacts or continuous funding are rare • Philanthropists often set a vision themselves and then fund based on that vision • Neoliberal institutions resist challenges to the status quo
<p>3. Discourse & Worldview (assumptions below the surface)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wealthy people are smart and visionary and deserve to set visions for the masses • Idealistic thinking is harmful, leads to failed projects and broken hearts • Dreaming too much about the future makes present problems feel unbearable • White supremacy teaches that some bodies are more valued and sacred than others 	<p>4. Myth & Metaphor (deep stories, unconscious beliefs)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entrepreneurial genius • Nose to the grindstone • Head in the clouds • Naïve optimism • Icarus flew to close to the sun • Scarcity. Protecting "me and mine" • Racial superiority. White savior • “Savages” and “Uncivilized” people needed to be dominated and educated by Europeans who hold superior visions

Finally, to summarize these findings, we use the previous ‘Four I’s of Oppression Framework’ to identify the layers of barriers that currently encroach on the space for long-term visioning in Fig. 2.

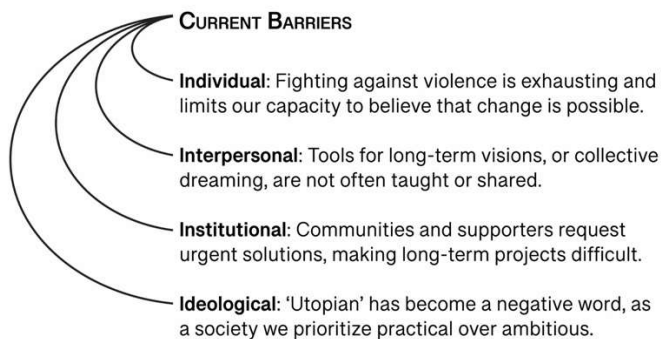


Fig.2: Placing the barriers from advocates on the framework of layers of oppression.

Discussion: Barriers to Long-term Dreaming

The absence of formal practice for social dreaming, collective visioning, or long-term futures was a surprising finding. With such a strong understanding of past, present, and future, it is significant that racial justice advocates are not yet using long-term visions as a strategy. There is research that proposes that ‘short-termism’ may be overcome in business settings when organizations “create a climate of trust that allows individuals to weather the short-term setbacks necessary to achieve long term results” (Lavery, 2004, p. 949). Further research is needed to investigate how this might translate into social organizations and in general, the practical and emotional resistance to social dreaming in advocacy work. Additionally, more can be done with the CLA to explore future scenarios where long-term perspectives are celebrated.

Critical discourses in racial literacy support thinking in long time horizons, but it may seem “unserious” to dream of a better world within a very serious context. It certainly feels luxurious in a resource-scarce setting. And it may feel utopian and too idealistic in a habitus that prioritizes critical knowledge and faces denial and ignorance from outsiders.

The current conditions (urgent needs and resources focused on short-term impact) and practices (strategies focused on removing present barriers) do not support adequate space for turning calls for change into visions. Long-term thinking and imagination are active in racial justice advocacy. But there is little support for creating long-term plans, visioning, or exploring what the better future could be. As we see in the CLA (Table 2), the idealism of communities envisioning new ways of being challenges many commonly held beliefs.

We acknowledge that there are limitations to this research study and that it is only the beginning of what we hope to be a deeper investigation of how perspectives of the future are currently used in racial justice work. It is important to note that the participant sample is small and cannot represent the vast array of people who engage in antiracism advocacy. The sample was limited to U.S.-based people, and a great deal could be learned by expanding the geographic scope. Additionally, analysis was conducted through the primary researcher’s position and perspective as a white American female. Although we made efforts to bring additional perspectives into the research process, researchers with different experiences of racism, oppression, activism, non-profit work, community organizing, and futures practice, among other standpoints, could add insightful perspectives to the analysis.

Overcoming Barriers

In this work we find an opportunity for futuring activities to play a liberatory and inspiring, but also practical role. Adrienne maree brown draws inspiration from speculative fiction, yet she acknowledges that “losing our imagination is a symptom of trauma. Reclaiming the right to dream the future, strengthening the muscle to imagine together as Black people, is a revolutionary decolonizing activity” (brown, 2017, pp. 163–164). For futures to be leveraged appropriately for liberation, they must take into account these very real, material, lived barriers to imagining and visioning.

What futuring practices can do

For advocates to make the space to dream, the tools for visioning must demonstrate their immediate usefulness and relevance to everyday concerns. Advocates need evidence that visioning time is well spent if they are to invest time in clarifying the outcomes they are building toward and clarify the actions to take and engage others in the long-term work. Harrington et al., (2019) identified a similar hesitation to engage in dreaming in their community-based participatory research. The priority is for solutions that are realistic and self-sustainable by the community when designers and researchers have left the room. To appear clearly useful, tools must articulate their purpose and connection to strategic next steps.

For futures approaches to feel relevant and liberatory, they should be connected to the values of social justice work. Both futurists and advocates see time expansively, and advocates attend to the way the past shapes the present. Futuring tools cannot be agnostic or silent about oppression in the past and present. Bringing historical, structural injustice into the conversation about current situations and future possibilities is essential. Arguing to acknowledge harm is already an emotional burden that weighs heavily on advocates fighting systems that are willfully ignorant (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Sullivan & Tuana, 2007). Closing the gap between those futures tools that do not typically engage reparative history and advocates who dedicate themselves to repair is bridging work that futures tools can do. We see this bridging in the CLA, but other tools lack careful attention to the patterns of the past.

Embracing *collective* visioning is essential for community-driven work. Participants in this study felt trepidation regarding their ‘right’ to construct a vision for a group or a mission. Scholar activists Khasnabish and Haiven assert that “the radical imagination is something we *do*, and something we do *together*” (Khasnabish & Haiven, 2012, p. 411). Along these lines, racial justice movements such as Black Lives Matter are sometimes referred to by outsiders as being “leaderless” while activists in the movement such as Patrisse Khan-Cullors (2016) refer to them as being “leaderful.” Co-founder Alicia Garza writes, “Decentralization would allow for a different practice of power, where many people rather than a small few determined the direction of the project” (Garza, 2020, p. 183). While the participants hesitated to assert their own visions on others, at the same time they easily imagined and described rich, interesting, better worlds. Futurists might lean into this notion of “leaderful”-ness to encourage and scaffold collaborative storytelling and collective visioning to facilitate the creation and distribution of liberatory futures.

What racial justice practices can do

For those advocates who are intrigued to explore ways to bring longer-term visions into their work, we offer a few suggestions. To reconnect back to our original framework, we have mapped these opportunities onto the ‘Four I’s’ framework (Fig. 3).

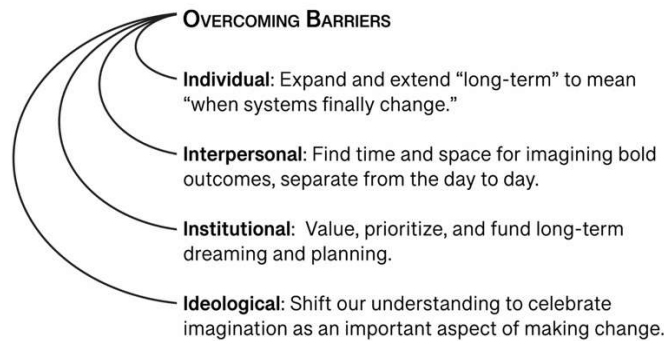


Fig. 3: Exploring the structural ways that long-term visioning might be supported and embraced in racial justice contexts.

Our research asked advocates to imagine what it looks like when their work is ridiculously successful. A key part of this is redefining the concept of ‘long-term’ to reflect radical goals for systems change rather than the length of a project or a source of funding. At the internalized level, advocates and organizing leaders can seek out, on their

own, more visioning tools and practices that stretch their thinking about the future. Linda Stout's book, *Collective Visioning* (2011), is a practical guide to imagining futures with communities. Duncombe & Lambert write about the power of utopian dreaming in their book, *Art of Activism* (2021). The purpose of these activities is to explore and spend time in the world that you want to achieve. Advocates can then ground themselves in these long-term goals and reflect on whether this way of thinking gives focus or distraction to the work.

Thinking interpersonally, we consider the groups and roles that shape when and how advocates are able to vision. What our research has made clear is that advocates need distance from the everyday to dream of the future. Care-based support could provide time away from day-to-day stresses and would offer the relief they need to imagine bold and idealistic outcomes. That support would need to provide both physical distance from everyday work as well as emotional distance from the daily tasks of attending to the suffering they seek to ease with their work. Organizational visioning work often happens in offsite retreats for these very reasons. But advocates may need to be supported in additional ways to release the responsibility they feel toward the present day, so they can spend time and attention on the future.

As we've heard, institutional support for advocates to generate and hold very long-term vision is rare. Advocates need both the mandate for creating visions and the funding to stay with them. Ideally, structures will change to support and reward generating and sharing advocate visions of long-term success. Foundations and other funding sources could be a leverage point for fostering a plurality of visions that come from the people most engaged in the issue. Rather than relying on individuals to find time and tools, their funding sources, institutions, and education strategies would value frontline visions enough to adequately resource these practices. Specifically, interviewees mentioned that they wished to see more flexible RFPs that support getting at root causes and funding that values deep investment in community change.

We can see the seeds of an ideological shift around envisioning long-term, optimistic possibilities for justice movements in the increasing engagement with the work of Afrofuturists. Now may be the time when radical dreaming in movement spaces can expand. Several interviewees referred to Octavia Butler as a source of inspiration for imagining the future. This may be a result of Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown's book of visionary fiction, *Octavia's brood: Science fiction stories from social justice movements* (2015) and the Allied Media Conference in Detroit which convenes each year to explore "emerging futures" for "visionary organizing" (<https://amc.alliedmedia.org>). The commitment to long-term change has always been there, it is the specificity of imagining what long-term outcomes look like that needs attention now.

Conclusion and Future Work: Attending to the Gap Between Futures Practices and Justice Spaces

The radical imaginations of advocates are available, but the conditions and practices to formalize these visions are not present. People working to enact change can easily propose how systemic changes could result in different future possibilities. What is rare, however, is turning these imaginative proposals into visionary materials or long-term plans. These visions of better futures are not treated as concepts to act on. To do that dreaming they need structural support. To support the capacity for long-term visioning, advocates need (1) Demand for it, so that it can be prioritized, (2) Resources to make it happen (funding, tools, and appropriate facilitation), and (3) Distance from their battles against white supremacy.

To diversify the stories that society has about what futures are possible, it is important for people who facilitate futures literacy to bridge the gap between futures practice and racial justice work. It is important to attend to the very real constraints of people who are actively engaged in making change. Advocacy for repairing historical injustice is ripe with imaginative possibilities for how to build healthier futures. We encourage future studies to give more attention to these spaces, but to do so only with respect for the insights and wisdom that have been growing there for centuries. People working at the forefront of shifting systems toward justice have brilliant contributions to be made to how to think about creating future concepts and how to approach systems change.

Additional research is needed to truly bridge long-term visioning practices with the immediate needs of racial justice movements. We will continue to investigate ways to create space in justice movements to use long-term visions in a way that is useful. Some questions that remain for us are understanding the dynamics of futures perspectives in advocate spaces: Developing a deeper understanding of the resistance and self-protection toward

imagining very long-term futures. What considerations of trauma should be incorporated into visioning practices? What can we learn about engaging trauma before futuring, as in the work by Milojević (2013)? How will tools and practices account for a diversity of lived experiences? As well as questions about how structural support can be provided to value, encourage, resource, and celebrate the creation of ambitious visions of long-term change.

We have great hope for the possibilities that are enabled when the tools of futures studies support the work of racial justice advocates. Expanding the way that advocates think about long-term futures, so that visions of equitable housing and education, new forms of safety and accountability, liberation, and joy for everyone, can become tangible and shared. But to do this, the people who fight each day for change need space and time for dreaming. Advocates have visions for what is possible, but little time and support to make those possibilities specific and collective. If shared visions help to make better futures more likely to happen, then people who work daily to make justice a reality must be given time, resources, and tools to capture their visions and share them with others.

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