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The function of art is to do more than tell it  
like it is—it's to imagine what is *possible*.

—BELL HOOKS

## Harnessing Cultural Power

FAVIANNA RODRIGUEZ

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To the leaders, organizers, and funders of the climate movement:

Culture is power. The music we listen to, the social media we consume, the food we eat, the movies and television shows we watch—these all inform our values, behaviors, and worldviews. Culture is in a constant battle for our imagination. It is our most powerful tool to inspire the social change these times demand. Current global events, from pandemics to massive wildfires, demonstrate how interconnected and interdependent we are as human beings, with one another and with Earth. As the old narrative of capitalism reveals its devastating failures, we urgently need more compelling and relatable stories that show us what a just, sustainable, and healthy world can look like. The old myths will die when we can replace them with new ones. We need our storytellers—a mighty force—to help us shift our mythology and imagine a future where together we thrive *with* nature. That is a power we must harness, if we are to find our way out of the climate crisis. We must build a cultural strategy for the climate movement.

Perspectives and points of view shape societal values, practices, and behaviors. They influence our understanding of everything from gender to race to our relationship with the natural world. Our current relationship to the Earth is based on a worldview of domination that supports an extractive economy. This is a myth of man's making, and it's one that has influenced our cultural imaginations since Westerners conquered the land, ravaged Indigenous communities, and built a society around fossil fuel extraction, industrial animal agriculture, cheap labor, and what Greta Thunberg calls "fairy tales of eternal economic growth."

Though I didn't quite know it at the time, I started to learn these lessons as a kid, growing up in a concrete jungle. Highly creative, I loved to draw and paint and create new worlds on my terms, but my family was busy surviving. My parents, immigrants who migrated to

California from Peru in 1968, raised me in East Oakland—a neighborhood of dead cement and abandoned industrial buildings—at a time when the crack epidemic was ravaging my community. Police brutality and gang violence surrounded me. But it was also a place with a strong legacy of the unapologetic culture of the Black Panther Party, an example of how the status quo can shift and community support networks emerge when people create culture *on their terms* to confront dominant power structures.

Today I can see the invisible force that was ravaging my childhood community—the pollution in my hood that was causing asthma and making my neighbors sick. I lived next to the I-880 highway, which carries the highest volume of truck traffic in the San Francisco Bay Area as it slices through communities of color, including the neighborhood I still call home. In contrast, the nearby I-580, which cuts through more affluent and White communities, did not allow trucks. Those communities were protected, while we ingested toxic diesel fumes that cut our life spans.

I didn't have the language back then to connect the dots, but I do today. My community, like most communities of color and Indigenous communities, was intentionally disenfranchised, poisoned, and turned into a dumping ground. Injustices intersected: violence, poverty, drugs, government neglect, and environmental racism.

When it comes to climate change, most of the stories and cultural content that exist to inform and organize people are overwhelmingly pain oriented, outdated, and *bella* White. They don't reveal the racial and economic drivers behind the climate crisis; they don't reflect the reasons why my community was exposed to pollution while White communities just a few miles away had better air quality. In fact, most often they either leave my people out of the story entirely or center White men as activist heroes and rely on doom-and-gloom narratives.

We are not seeing diverse stories about climate because the folks who control the cultural engine in the United States—TV, film, visual art, music, gaming, performance, publishing—are overwhelmingly White men. And they exist in a status quo that has entrenched their power and dramatically narrowed our collective gaze, including how we view our relationship to the natural world and our practices for caring for one another. Just as ecosystems need biodiversity to thrive,

society needs cultural diversity to grow new possibilities. Monoculture deadens our collective potential.

Not only are we not seeing diverse stories, but we're not seeing enough stories, period. A recent look at episodic TV shows found that in 2019 only three dealt with climate change (excluding docu-series that explicitly focus on climate). *Vice* noted, "A crisis that's reshaping every aspect of human experience is being effectively ignored by TV."

The power of culture lies in the power of story. Stories change and activate people, and people have the power to change norms, cultural practices, and systems. Stories are like individual stars. For thousands of years, humans used the stars to tell stories, to help make sense of their lives, to orient them on the planet. Stories work in the same way. When many stars coalesce around similar themes, they form a narrative constellation that can disrupt business as usual. They reveal patterns and help illuminate that which was once obscured. The powerful shine in one story can inspire other stories. We need more transformational stories so that we can connect the dots and shift narratives.

The climate movement has largely left storytellers and culture out of its strategy toolbox. Now is the time to change that. Here's how we can harness the power of culture for climate action.

### Pass the mic to artists and culture-makers of color.

Most of the prominent cultural icons speaking out about climate change are White. This is not because people of color don't get it or don't care—in fact, polling shows people of color are more alarmed or concerned than their White counterparts. That includes 69 percent of Latinx Americans, the most of any racial group. Gatekeepers must welcome in the wisdom of the communities most impacted by the extractive economy—frontline communities of color and Indigenous communities. Centering these storytellers—in television, in print media, and in pop culture—can mobilize important constituencies, particularly those who will be directly affected by climate chaos and displacement but who do not relate to the mostly White actors, politicians, environmentalists, and scientists who are the planet's current high-profile spokespeople. Imagine hip-hop songs that say "F\*ck the

polluters” or Indigenous storytellers being nominated on every Oscars slate. Culture anchored in the voices of those marginalized by our current command-extract-control society is critical for the urgent transformation that’s required.

### **Build diverse cultural infrastructure.**

Right now, there are virtually no comprehensive support systems to help creators, musicians, screenwriters, poets, journalists, and artists—those who shape the culture we consume every day—to engage effectively with climate issues. This is too critical an issue to leave everyone grappling with it on their own, expecting individuals to educate themselves and find their own way to engage. To fill that gap, I founded the Center for Cultural Power to support culture makers as they engage more deeply with climate topics and other social justice issues and to harness their immense power to shape our core narratives. Imagine trainings and fellowships for artists and writers to learn about the climate crisis; funding to create new content that is intersectional and speaks to multiracial audiences; more support for artists of color, who are already facing barriers in the cultural industries because of the domination of White men in power. By fostering a more equitable cultural sector, we can cultivate the cultural content that propels robust climate action.

### **Include artists and makers in your work.**

We need a new wave of artists who are succeeding in making visible the stories of those most affected. We must include creatives more thoughtfully in our change work, not just through one-off transactions—like having a musician at your gala—but through long-term relationships with artists that build our cultural capacity. This can look like hosting an artist-in-residence, collaborating with artists to facilitate storytelling programs for your constituents, inviting an artist to join your board, teaming up with artists to design protests, or commissioning cultural activations. For example, during the 2019 Global Climate Strikes, a coalition of artists and climate groups organized a massive live-painting intervention consisting of eleven twenty-

five-foot murals in the center of San Francisco’s financial district, an area lined by San Francisco’s biggest banks. The murals featured colorful solutions to climate chaos, with messages like “Green New Deal” and “Return to the Old Ways,” and hundreds of community members participated in painting them. The urgency of the climate crisis demands that we develop strategies that embrace the enthusiasm of artists and nurture an abundance of cultural and narrative strategies to reimagine life on Earth.

### **Make human stories to move human beings.**

Human stories are more powerful for inciting action than counting carbon or detailing melting glaciers. Fossil fuel extraction is not just a lamentable occurrence. Oil does not extract itself; gas doesn’t burn on its own. To talk about ecological devastation and climate chaos, we must talk about the fact that we live in a culture that condones the exploitation of other human beings and the lands on which they live and severely impacts communities, whether in East Los Angeles or on tribal lands in Standing Rock. For example, I’ve been deeply inspired to see how girls in the climate movement have rapidly popularized a new story about the responsibility that adults have to young people and have spoken with unapologetic fearlessness in confronting the establishment. We must challenge the idea that some life matters more than other life. This means creating more stories that center the experiences of human beings, showcase solutions, activate our human empathy, and help usher in another worldview.

### **Create culture to challenge consumption.**

For centuries, we have been told a story that sources of energy are endless, that extraction of fossil fuels can continue without bounds. While we know we need massive expansion of electrified public transportation to transition from fossil fuels, how many awesome movies do you see that center the individual car as a status symbol? While we know the planet cannot sustain the level of meat consumption that is devastating our world’s forests and exploiting the animal kingdom, how much of our food culture has normalized flesh on our tables?

Where is the pop culture that makes riding public transportation and eating a plant-based diet fun, cool, and accessible to diverse audiences? Imagine the power of being exposed to an abundance of stories, songs, and images that challenge our fundamental consumption culture and expand our perspectives by helping us *feel* the consequences of our choices. What if we made it uncool to use fossil fuels in the same way smoking became uncool?

### Let culture connect us to nature.

A global culture of domination and extraction has severed our human relationship to nature, but a culture of stewardship and ecological harmony can reconnect us to our ancestral stories in which we were more deeply connected to nature and her rhythms. Culture allows us to confront, acknowledge, and mourn what was lost, while offering a way to move forward. The forced displacement and enslavement of African people, the genocide of Indigenous people, and the colonization project more generally have had a devastating impact on our relationship to nature, and that is a wound that must be tended. Consider the power of Indigenous storytelling in the fight against fossil fuel corporations. During protests at Standing Rock against the Dakota Access Pipeline, the story of the evil black snake and the heroic water protectors was so powerful that it united Native tribes and activated people of all races from all walks of life. Many Indigenous communities hold a worldview that the land is not ours to exploit—rather, that we are stewards of nature. A climate-movement strategy should make visible the work of Native and Black communities. Stories can decolonize our imaginations.

### Stand in the power of *yes!*

In the social justice movement, I've observed that our work is often centered on what we are against. We are clear about what we don't want—the *no*. And that's understandable when our communities are constantly being attacked. Our movements become our first line of defense. But we cannot envision a future when we're stuck in fight or flight. We must also create a culture that is about our *yes*, and this is

where we can rely on artists. For example, artist Molly Crabapple, writer Naomi Klein, and filmmaker Avi Lewis collaborated with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to create a powerful illustrated video about what the future could look like if we have a Green New Deal in the United States. This piece of art, grounded in AOC's personal story, went viral and is one of the few pop culture pieces to date about the future that's possible with a Green New Deal. Imagine an outpouring of cultural content that shows us a future where political, economic, and cultural power are justly distributed and humans are in a regenerative relationship with nature. There must be room for creation that is captivating and irresistible. We can use our radical imagination to visualize and manifest another world, and we can make that world feel real through cultural products such as TV shows, films, comic books, images, or songs.

The stories we tell will determine whether our society declines and self-destructs or whether we can heal and thrive.

Remember that every story is based on a particular perspective on the world. We must always consider how an author's point of view affects the myths that form our reality. The Nigerian novelist and poet Chinua Achebe got it right when he said, "Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter." Let's ask ourselves: Who is telling the story or creating the image? What values do they espouse? Whom do I see? Whom do I *not* see? What worldview is being communicated? How is nature treated? Who stands to gain from this way of seeing the world? Whom do they blame for the problem? Who would benefit from the solutions they offer?

As I stand in my power as an artist and climate justice leader, I now understand that it's time to write a new story. I cannot heal my community or myself without healing the planet, and we cannot save the planet without healing injustice. So the question is: Will you stand with me in harnessing culture for the betterment of Earth, to save life as we know it?

With love and an unbounded imagination,  
FAVIANNA

## Becoming a Climate Citizen

KATE KNUTH

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Leaderful means there is enough room for all of us. Seeing everyone roll in together is much more powerful than having one or two people speak for everyone. Being inter-generationally leaderful also generates the best ideas and solutions. . . . We need to do this together, and we can do it lovingly.

—ELIZABETH YEAMPIERRE

As I try to make sense of how to navigate this time, I've come to see "climate citizenship" as a path forward. This concept asserts that any chance of society gracefully navigating the climate crisis will take a renaissance of citizenship and civic life. Likewise, the scale and scope of the climate crisis mean that it will reshape citizenship in fundamental ways.

Though I didn't call it climate citizenship at the time, this idea has its roots in the earliest days of my career. In August 2005, I was completing a master's degree in conservation at the University of Oxford. I spent my days toggling between editing my thesis and reading news coverage of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. The storm in motion was horrifying, and the days that followed were gut-wrenching. For the first time, I understood that climate change would not just unleash dangerous weather; it was going to rip its way through all of society's imperfections, laying bare our unjust systems in ways that would leave people dead. In fact, it was already killing people. And it was starting to show the potential to wipe out entire cultures.

As I finished up my schooling and Katrina revealed the power and injustice of climate change, I asked myself: *What's the best thing I can do in response?*

My answer was to move back to my hometown of New Brighton, Minnesota—a suburb of Minneapolis and Saint Paul—and recommit to my roots. Six weeks later, I launched my campaign for the Minnesota House of Representatives.

The next year gave me a deep education in democracy. I realized early on that running for office involves a lot of listening. After connecting with the most active Democrats in my area and securing a contested party endorsement, I turned my attention to a critical central task: knocking on doors and listening. A single father told me of struggling to pay for both his own insulin and his son's epilepsy medication on a butcher's salary. An elderly man described living through the Great Depression and his gratitude for the Social Security pro-