

THE ALCHEMY LECTURE

Five Manifestos for the Beautiful World

PHOEBE BOSWELL

SAIDIYA HARTMAN

JANAÍNA OLIVEIRA

JOSEPH M. PIERCE

CRISTINA RIVERA GARZA

With an Introduction by

CHRISTINA SHARPE

THE ALCHEMY LECTURE SERIES

The annual Alchemy Lecture is a collaboration between York University and Knopf Canada. Grounded in the idea of alchemy as a “form of speculative thought” and “a process of transformation and creation,” it brings together distinguished thinkers from different disciplines and geographies to address the most pressing issues of our times. Each year, the Lecture takes the form of a live, multi-vocal public event presented by York University followed by a book published under the Alchemy imprimatur at Knopf Canada.

PREVIOUS LECTURES

Borders, Human Itineraries, and All Our Relation



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INTRODUCTION

The Alchemy Lecture is interested in producing new modes of apprehending and changing the conditions of our contemporary world. The enduring principle is that, in times like these, of great crises—climate catastrophe, human catastrophe (the weaponizing and hardening of borders, the planned re-invasion of Haiti by another name, continued occupation, settler colonialism, forced movement and immiseration of people all over the world, genocides in Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Gaza Jenin Rafah)—we must resist the siloing of people and think/make/do. And we must risk something toward bringing into being other ways of living together.

Last year's inaugural Alchemy Lecture was "Borders, Human Itineraries, and all our Relation." I want to bring forward a few of the questions and a charge that animated it: first, "What environments must we foster to imagine the world anew after the undoing?" (Adeyemo); and second, "What is the language we need to live right now? . . . I mean the language of words, speech, and text. What should we talk about when so many words exist to destroy us?" (Diaz). The charge

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was that we engage in the work of the “ongoing invention of new languages of the collective” (Walcott).

“Five Manifestos for the Beautiful World” goes some way toward answering those questions, posing new ones, and working in the materials of that charge.

A manifesto is a public declaration, a written statement declaring publicly the intentions, motives, or views of its issuer. A manifesto starts in the condition that we are enduring and ruminates on the dire circumstances and perhaps the illusions that we inhabit. A manifesto is a critique and an urgent call to action that often contains a resolve *to* action. That resolve might be to gathering; it might be to dreaming. Gathering, speaking, dreaming, and writing are each powerful actions in the face of structural violence, genocide, and repression.

What must be made manifest, confronted, spoken in these catastrophic times includes the rejection of that which is manufactured as consent and the offering in its place of another set of understandings and imaginings of the given world and the made world. As Rinaldo Walcott reminds us, the struggle for and over meaning is real.

These Alchemy Lectures make clear that a lecture is not a spectacle: it is a gathering; it is a communion; we meet, here, to make plans, to see a way—many ways—to go on.

Each of these manifestos speaks from the structural conditions under which we live and labor, in order to address the crises that we are living through.

Relation is an invitation to live. **Joseph M. Pierce** (Cherokee Nation) offers a “manifesto as storying,” “a manifesto for multiplicity, for the vibrational possibilities of kinship,” an

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invitation to join the work involved in the making and sustaining of relation and our mutual thriving. He ends in dancing.

There are urgencies that move us to the work of care. **Janaína Oliveira** (Brazil) begins in the “dance dancing;” she then proceeds to elaborate a collective exercise of care as curation where curation (“care, cultivation, healing”) for a beautiful world strives to “reconstruct . . . imaginaries, so that death, violence, and oblivion are not automatically identified as places of belonging.”

There is an architecture to replace those militaristic and brutal imaginations. **Phoebe Boswell** (UK/Kenya) begins in 2020 with the terrors of COVID-19 and moves us through the failed imaginations of politicians and art-world establishments to a proposition: what, “if we’re lucky and brave,” might then be the work of the artist—to “make our own little worlds within our work [where] we invite people in and hope that these worlds might somehow ignite something that moves us towards the belief in a new place.”

The kinds of violences enacted on Black life that are sometimes embraced as possibility must be abandoned; **Saidiya Hartman** (US) gives us a polemic and a satire that lays bare and skewers the brutal neoliberal logics that produce what the comedian Ryan Ken so aptly called “diversity and inclusion war crimes” and what Saidiya names “the gift of pragmatism[:] a profound tolerance of the unlivable.”

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The subjunctive is a tense for living and **Cristina Rivera Garza** (Mexico/US) offers us fifteen theses where it is such a grammar: “If we were to write a house. If a house were a communal pact, a collaborative belaboring, a form of direct action that required the time of others, their hands and lungs, their eyes, their hope. If a house were the opposite of war.” And in the final thesis: “In the subjunctive, no one takes anyone’s life.”

Words matter. As Toni Cade Bambara tells us, “Words are to be taken seriously. I try to take seriously acts of language. Words set things in motion. I’ve seen them doing it. Words set up atmospheres, electrical fields, charges. I’ve felt them doing it. Words conjure. I try not to be careless about what I utter, write, sing. I’m careful about what I give voice to.”¹

The powerful address uncertainty with brutality; the powerful address dissent with brutality; the powerful address most everything with brutality. These five manifestos contend that the Beautiful World is not a touristic world of consumption and extraction, but one that meets Dionne Brand’s understanding of beauty, that it is “not uncomplicated . . . Beauty is the ability to see everything; to confront everything.”² How must we live? What architecture might facilitate that living? What urgencies move us? What delusions of inclusion are long past time to abandon? What is the tense of our speaking, the tense of our doing?

That we gather in this time of catastrophe, matters. That we speak in this time of catastrophe, matters. I am grateful to gather here with intention, to read the words of these five Alchemists and their manifestos for the Beautiful World.

—CHRISTINA SHARPE, Toronto, 2024

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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CHRISTINA SHARPE

NOTES

1. Toni Cade Bambara, “What It Is I Think I’m Doing Anyhow,” in Janet Sternburg, ed., *The Writer on Her Work* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1980), 153.
2. Dionne Brand in conversation with Christina Sharpe, qtd. in *Nomenclature: New and Collected Poems* (Toronto, ON: McClelland & Stewart, 2022), xxxiv.

A Manifesto for Speculative Relations

JOSEPH M. PIERCE

NOTES

1. For testimony of the Trail of Tears, see Vicki Rozema, ed., *Voices from The Trail of Tears* (Durham, NC: Blair, 2003).
2. This version is somewhat abbreviated and is drawn from the following sources: James Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee* (1900; New York: Dover, 1995), 258–59, who notes that it was told in nearly identical form by his informants Ayu’ini (Swimmer), Itagunahi (John Ax), and Suyeta; Christopher B. Teuton, *Cherokee Stories of the Turtle Island Liars’ Club* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 234, as told by